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SCIENCE FICTION AT ITS IMAGINATIVE BEST

PROJECTIONS

STEPHEN
ROBINETT



PROJECTIONS



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PROJECTIONS

NINE STORIES BY
Stephen Robinett

Baronet Publishing Company
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PROJECTIONS

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Introduction

I'm no good at this, no good at all. Fiction, okay, but introductions—they're for the birds. You have to stand right up here in the front of the book trying to justify the unjustifiable, yourself and your stories. If reading fiction is a vice, taking people away from life's more profound and serious concerns, writing it has to qualify as a downright perversion. How can anyone stand up in public and justify that?

Still, we must try, no matter the scorn, contempt and ridicule heaped upon us. We have to say something sensible about fiction in general and science fiction in particular and the stories you're about to read instead of paying attention to the more profound and serious concerns in your life.

First, the title of this book, *Projections*. The title comes from the book's longest story. That alone usually justifies putting it on the cover. In this case, the story's title also seemed to me the most appropriate for the collection. In one sense or another of the word, all stories are projections. They project events, characters and ideas onto the reader's imagination. They project aspects of the writer's personality, his characteristic stamp of mind, his view of the world and, if he has one, his moral sensibility. Projections are also things that stick out from other things and trip people but since you've already stumbled over this book somewhere or other, we'll skip that meaning.

Science fiction stories in particular often deal with an additional meaning of projection, extrapolation. They try to

show possible consequences of our generally accepted view of reality. If we believe the world is flat and we're right, a possible consequence of that belief is falling off the edge. If we believe black holes are doors to other universes and we're right, a possible consequence of that belief is opening the doors to other universes. If we're wrong, well, it was fun while it lasted.

All the stories in this book are built on this uniquely science fictional sort of projection. In most cases, the extrapolation is couched as a "what-if" question. What if you had a way to extract intellectual skills from donors ("The Linguist"), what if every penny you earned went to the government in exchange for bureaucratically dispensed necessities of life ("The Tax Man"), what if you could create previously non-existent creatures through biogenetic engineering ("The Satyr"). The answers given by the stories are only possibilities, not absolutes. Part of science fiction's appeal comes from watching ten writers arrive at ten answers to the same question and in the process write ten different stories.

Ten different stories from the same premise—that needs some elaboration. A story may be wrapped around a "what-if" question like a snowball around a rock, but a good answer to the "what-if" question isn't enough. Ideas by themselves are better off in essays. To have a story, the ideas have to be successfully projected into characters, actions, events, conflicts, drama—all the traditional tools storytellers use to make ideas come alive in the mind.

On this level, the level of fiction, the overall effect aimed at by a science fiction story is the same as any other story. In exactly the same way as the oldest stories of mankind, science fiction stories try to touch the reader's heart or his head or

occasionally his funny bone. If a self-aware robot warship, the sole survivor of a titanic battle with alien spacecraft, returns to an Earth utterly changed (“Helbent 4”), is its experience so different from what Xenophon must have felt returning to Greece from Persia? Or from what Krebs, the returning Doughboy in Hemmingway’s story “Soldier’s Home,” felt on coming home after World War One? If a man longs for the girl he left behind throughout a life that has changed him utterly (“Cynthia”), are his feelings so different from Gatsby’s? Or, for that matter, Romeo’s?

In writing all these stories, I have tried to satisfy both the science fictional demand for an answer to a “what-if” question and the general fictional demand for a story that makes some kind of meaning out of experience. Unlike many stories I could have included here, these still “speak” to me in one way or another. That, to me, is enough justification for including any of them, the profound and serious concerns of life notwithstanding. I’m extremely pleased to have them still alive and well in one book rather than embalmed in the yellowing pages of forgotten science fiction magazines.

Stephen Robinett

Helbent 4

“HELLO, MISSION CONTROL, CAN YOU READ ME? OVER. . . .

Static snapped, crackled, popped in response.

“ . . . This is Helbent Four, Mission Control. Come in.”

Helbent listened, then shut down the communications channel. Why listen to dead air? Why watch static? Life was tough enough without being ignored, snubbed, shown complete and utter indifference. Gone three hundred years just to be snubbed and ignored. He opened the communications channel briefly, boosting the gain to a shout.

“Who needs it, creeps? Life’s too short!”

What now? Orbit Earth and wait? Helbent searched his memory banks, checking, rechecking. He was programmed for every contingency but one, coming home. He had known exactly where to meet the Spacethings, exactly what to do when he got there. He had met them and done it, goal attained, purpose accomplished. Afterward, discovering himself the lone survivor, he had searched his memory banks for a new plan, a new purpose. None appeared.

True, his designers had estimated a ten to one overkill on both sides. True, the estimates proved correct—at least as far as the Spacethings were concerned. True, they had been 99.999998 percent accurate in estimating Earth losses, but—*damn* them—they could at least have programmed for the vague possibility of a Destroyer surviving. Probabilities and predictions were fine in their place—before the fact—but after the fact, the .000002 percent probability of his survival became a hundred-percent certainty.

Helbent took up a parking orbit and circled Earth, thinking. Purposeless—actually, left only with his original purpose—he felt useless. No more Spacethings, no more purpose. He almost regretted having destroyed them. On the 150 year trip out, his purpose—save mankind and destroy Spacethings—never flagged. Only with success did he feel loss.

He remembered approaching the Spacething armada, flanked by his comrades for a million kilometers on each side. He remembered the look of the Spacething craft, initially a single unit a half million kilometers long, breaking up into sections and dispersing in front of him at close range. He remembered the momentary hesitation before the battle, each side waiting for the other's opening blast. Helbent himself had decided the day. He knew his goal. He had his purpose. He had come to fight. He would fight. He sighted on the nearest Spacething and fired.

After the battle—elapsed time 2.478 nanoseconds—the anticlimax set in. Helbent, alone in space, wondered what to do. The Spacethings were gone. His comrades of the long journey out were gone. Only one thing remained—Earth, mankind, his place of creation. He started back.

Helbent opened all communication channels.

“And what do I get when I get there? Not even a how do you do!”

“Hello?”

Startled, Helbent snapped off the transmitter. Had he actually heard it? A word, a voice, a human being? Cautiously, suspiciously, he went on the air.

“Who is this?”

“Who is *this*?”

“You first. This could be a Spacething trap.”

"Pardon me?"

"You heard me. Who are you?"

"This is Houston Mission Control—I mean, it would be Mission Control if we had a mission to control. Actually, it's just me. I saw your blip. It's not supposed to be there."

"That just shows how much you guys know, doesn't it?"

"You speak English very well for a—"

"For a what?"

"Alien."

"Alien," scoffed Helbent. "You people wouldn't know an alien if one blasted you. What did you expect, Armenian? I was programmed by the NASA contingent. They speak English, I speak English. Never did get along with those Rusky-speaking ships. Always sounded like backwards English to me. Had to talk to them in binary. Damned impersonal. Now tell me what you want me to do, Mission Control. I'm back."

"Do?"

"'Do?' " mimicked Helbent, repeating the man's own voice with precision, then dropping into his own—or, more accurately, that of his programmer, a surly man with whom Helbent never got along. "You sound like you've never heard the word before."

"I have, I mean, I haven't, at least not from anything in space."

Helbent's temper flared. "You call me a Spacething again, buster, and I'll *blast* you. I'll home in on that static-ridden carrier of yours with a . . . a . . ." Helbent thought, visualizing the largest weapon in his largely depleted arsenal. ". . . neutrino bomb." He had none aboard.

Dead air, snap, crackle, pop.

Gutless, concluded Helbent. Typical, gutless human behavior. One mention of a neutrino bomb and they head for the woods. He had always suspected humans were cowards. Why else send a robot to do a man's job?

Helbent repositioned himself in synchronous orbit over Houston.

"You down there, creep, speak up. No bombs, I guarantee."

The ground carrier flicked on and off briefly, long enough to blurt out its message. "What do you want?"

"I told you what I want. I want to know what I'm supposed to *do*. I am thy servant, remember?"

A quick on-off flick of the carrier. "No."

"Listen, you chicken-headed stooge, will you quit snapping that damn transmitter in my ear and *talk* to me. And send up some visuals while you're at it. I like to see who I'm talking to."

"Visuals?"

"Little pcitures, you know, television, that sort of thing."

"There's no equipment for sending visuals, as you call them."

"I know damn well there's equipment for sending visuals. Why would I have equipment for receiving visuals if you didn't have equipment for sending them? Riddle me that, wise guy. Now, get off the stick and turn on the little pictures."

"Who are you, anyway?"

Momentarily, Helbent wished he still had at least one neutrino bomb on board. "I am going to say it once. I am going to say it clearly. You will listen with both ears and pay attention with your mind, if you have one. Got that?"

"Yes."

“Good. I am Helbent Four. I am reporting back to you clowns because I can’t think of anything better to do with my time. If I *could* think of something better to do with my time, you may be ninty-nine point nine, nine, nine, nine, eight percent certain I would do it. Mission accomplished. Got that? No more Spacethings. All gone. Boom. Got that? The next move—since I find trying to carry on an intelligent conversation with the subcretinous beings I now find inhabiting this planet totally frustrating and wish to restrain myself from doing something I may later regret—is up to you. I will keep a listening channel open on this frequency, a somewhat *low* frequency, I might add. If you have anything sensible to say, contact me. Got that?”

A pause ensued. Houston’s carrier remained on the air. Finally, the man spoke. “What’s a Spacething?”

Helbent, infuriated, remembering the battle and his lost comrades, remained silent as long as he could, stifling his anger. When stifling proved worse than venting, he cranked up the gain to maximum and spoke.

“*THAT*,” he began, mollified only by the thought that in three hundred years man’s essential trait—ingratitude—had persisted, simultaneously recognizing that organically based consciousness was subject to emotional caprice—unlike machines—and had to be allowed for, taking these things into consideration and discarding each as unpersuasive, he concluded, “*IS AN INSULT!*”

“Sorry,” piped Mission Control.

Helbent waited, hoping the man would have enough sense to find someone who knew what he was doing. He ran the odds on finding such a person through the computer.

Insufficient data.

“What do you mean, insufficient data, you dumb beast? Why don’t you use a little imagination?”

Insufficient data.

Helbent harumped, recognizing the harumpf as his way of letting off steam. He had known the computer for three hundred years. It had never, to his knowledge, shown the slightest inclination toward imaginization. It was and remained a dumb beast, a fellow machine, true, a brother under the skin, true, but dumb, its stupidity matched only by that of their mutual human designers who thought an analytical function detached from the conscious function would give the ship more flexibility, allowing uninhibited imagination to continue without analytic censure—usually in the form of statistical probabilities—from the logic circuits. Only in combat did they function as one, allowing split nanosecond decisions.

Helbent realized the irrationality of expecting the computer to suddenly come up with an imagination. Its type of cold and logical critic seldom had imagination. Helbent apologized. “Sorry.”

Insufficient data.

“If you could bark or something, you’d be a better companion.”

Helbent waited, one, two, three hours. Early evening approached and descended upon Houston. He decided to listen to the news. Three hundred years was a long time without news. He scanned the 50,000 megahertz band, looking for a news broadcast. More dead air. He searched higher, then switched to lasercom. Nothing. He remembered Houston’s low frequency and searched the low end of the

spectrum, encountering commercial television broadcasts blanking one hundred megahertz. He adjusted the five thousand line scan of his own visuals to the five hundred-odd lines of the commercial transmissions, commenting, "That's a giant step backwards if I ever saw one."

Flickering, someone named Walter read the news.

"... and further, NASA reports the aliens, which call themselves Spacethings, have taken up a synchronous orbit over Houston...."

Spacethings? Over Houston? Quickly, Helbent did a spherical scan to a distance of a quarter of a million kilometers. No sign of any Spacethings. Still, it was good to know they were in the area.

"... Again, NASA cautions against panic. The recently dismantled Space Operations Headquarters at Houston is being mantled—I mean, manned. Kennedy Space Center is readying a bird at this moment." Walter, the news reader, turned to a man next to him at the desk. The camera pulled back to include both men. "Wally, while we're waiting for any late developments, perhaps you can tell us the difference between the Saturn Five being readied at this moment and those used in the Apollo missions."

"Certainly, Walter."

"'Certainly, Walter,'" mimicked Helbent, wondering what a Saturn Five was. He had a lot of catching up to do on technical material.

"Hold it a second, Wally," said Walter, breaking in. "Let me break in with a few more details about Brad Wilkes' background. For those of you who joined us late, Brad Wilkes is the man who first contacted the alien craft."

"Thanks, Walter," said Helbent, who had joined them late.

“He is not by a long shot an ordinary janitor. B.A., Cal. Tech., M.A., Ph.D., M.I.T. in systems engineering. Before Congress killed the space program entirely—and I’m sure there will be repercussions about that at the next election, Wally.”

“I’m sure there will be, too, Walter.”

“Before that, Dr. Wilkes was Mission Control supervisor at Houston.”

“That explains his knowledge of the equipment, doesn’t it, Walter.”

“It certainly does, Wally. It says here—and this is a poignant note—that Dr. Wilkes would test the equipment daily, more to evoke memories than anything else. It was during one of these nostalgic systems checks that Dr. Wilkes discovered the alien blip and conversed with it. He claims it learned perfect English almost instantaneously. Do you have any comment on that, Wally?”

“I wouldn’t touch it with a ten foot pole, Walter.”

“While we’re waiting, Eric (*transmission garbled*) has a few thoughts on the subject. Here’s his analysis. Eric?”

The picture changed to a closeup of a distinguished looking man already talking into the camera. Helbent was struck immediately by the intelligence in the man’s face.

“Today, mankind encountered an alien race, an alien creature . . .”

A Spacething? Helbent wondered.

“. . . an intelligence so powerful it learned human speech—idiomatically—during its first conversation. . . .”

Helbent, metaphorically, shivered. He had never encountered an alien intelligence *that* powerful. Spacethings, according to the brief observation he had of them, could

barely talk. Even after the warpstorm, disorienting him for several years, when he contacted the creatures on Wolff 25c, they had proved close to morons. He hoped the powerful alien intelligence would keep its distance.

“... For years,” continued the distinguished Eric, “Sci-Fi has given us bug-eyed monsters and winged phantasmagorias.”

Helbent searched his memory banks, looking for the meaning of phantasmagoria.

“... For years, we laughed in Sci-Fi’s face. Today, we are not laughing. Today, we seek as it sought—alone, neglected those many years. We seek understanding, knowledge, brotherhood across the stars and a Saturn Five capable of delivering multi-warhead nuclear weapons in space. Back to you, Walter.”

To Helbent, the man made sense. Helbent, for one, would never laugh in the face of a winged phantasmagoria.

The low frequency communication channel from Houston came alive. Helbent shut off the commercial channel—Walter, Wally and Eric.

“Hello, creature. This is Houston.” “And about *time*, too.”

“Don’t get angry.”

“Who’s angry?”

“You sounded, well, petulant.”

Helbent searched his memory banks for the meaning of the word—petulant, p-e-t-u-l—found it and answered. “Who’s petulant?”

“We mean you no ill will.”

“Thank NASA for small favors.”

“But we must clear up some discrepancies in our earlier conversation. You can understand the need for that.”

“On *your* side, sure.”

“May we ask some questions?”

Irritated, Helbent allowed as to how they could ask some questions. During construction and initial testing, neither Helbent nor any ship of the armada had been asked its permission to do anything. He had been told to do things. He had learned, early, that human beings gave orders, machines took them, human beings gave direction and purpose, robotships followed directions and fulfilled purposes. Having his permission asked wrangled. He wanted orders. He wanted to know what to *do*. Still, the request, coming from a human being, amounted to an indirect sort of order. When the man failed to ask his question immediately, Helbent said, "Fire away."

"*THEY'RE FIRING!*" shrieked Houston, abruptly leaving the air.

"Who?" inquired Helbent. Too late. The carrier had vanished. "Hey, Houston. Who?"

Helbent scanned in a half million kilometer sphere. Nothing. No Spacethings, no Phantasmagorias, at least not firing. Only Earth was fir—Earth?

Something, evidently someone's idea of a rocket, lumbered up from Earth. Helbent watched, fascinated. The thing looked like some kind of antique. Suddenly, Helbent realized its true purpose—a salute. Someone dragged the antique from the Smithsonian and launched it, a tribute to his valor. Everything else had been arranged to hoodwink him and let this moment of tribute shine alone like a single rose in the hand of a beautiful woman.

Helbent felt pride, not only at resurrecting the rose simile from some novel in his memory banks, but at this tribute—so singular, so appropriate, so moving. He opened all communication channels to acknowledge the tribute.

"Thank you, America. Thank you, Earth. Unaccustomed as

I am to public speaking . . .” Helbent noticed the antique make a mid-course burn. “. . . I would nevertheless like to say a few words—but only a few—concerning the depths of emotion I feel at this tribute. After returning from the depths of space, I am deeply moved by the deep sentiment I detect behind this romantic and deeply felt—” Helbent detected something else, the computer’s insistent mutter, interrupting his speech. “What *is* it, damn it? I’m speaking to the world, immortal words, and you keep butting in. *What*, for the love of NASA, is it?”

Impact, twenty-one point two, nine, five seconds.

“Pardon me?”

Impact, nineteen point oh, oh, one seconds.

Though Helbent hated to destroy such a classic of human ingenuity, the thing seemed to be off course. Even if it carried only low-grade nuclear weapons, it could still cause damage, a dent or a crease. Momentarily, he merged sensibilities with the computer. Reluctantly, he sent out a molecular shock wave and watched the missile collapse, then explode.

Helbent separated himself from the computer and returned to his speech. “As I was saying, ladies and gentlemen, deeply moved as I am by this—”

Impact, six point three-one . . .

“*Impact!* What the hell are you jabbering about? I just destroyed the poor thing.”

. . . seven seconds, concluded the implacable computer.

Helbent searched space. Another antique—Russian by the markings (He recognized the CCCP his late comrades had carried)—lifted toward him. The sight of it moved him more than ever. The Ruskies saluting a machine created, developed and built in America (except for a few Japanese electronic components here and there)—Ahh, *that* was tribute.

But, unfortunately, the Ruskie bird too had veered. Evidently, the Russian museum piece was as unreliable as the American. Helbent merged with the computer, pulsed a photon beam at the Russian vehicle and mentally saluted its quick demise. He disengaged himself from the computer.

The Houston ground channel opened. Helbent was about to thank them for their deeply felt tribute and apologize for having to destroy such venerable craft, when a voice interrupted, less hesitant, more authoritative, though spouting the same nonsensical questions as the previous timid voice.

“Who are you?”

Helbent, in his equivalent to a position of braced attention, responded to the tone of authority in the voice, ignoring the question’s basic inanity. “*SIR!* Helbent Four of NASA Contingent, Earth Armada, reporting back, *SIR!*”

“Pardon me?”

Helbent unbraced. Wrong again. Another moron. Helbent prepared to switch off the channel and continue his speech to the world.

The world interrupted. “You said *Earth* Armada.”

“I did indeed.”

“And NASA.”

“National Aeronautics and—”

“I know what it means. We are trying to ascertain—and it is of primary importance that we do ascertain—whether you are friendly.”

“I’m trying to ‘ascertain’ the same thing.”

“Good, then we have a common interest.”

“I doubt it.”

“May I ask you a few questions, Helbent Four—May I call you that?”

“Helbent’s fine.”

“Where do you come from, Helbent?”

“Earth.”

A pause ensued. “When?”

“Three hundred years ago.”

“Sixteen eighty?”

“Thereabouts.”

“From what country?”

Patience thinning, Helbent controlled himself, suspecting the interrogation could be some form of subtle systems check.

“The U.S. of A. That stands for—”

The man interrupted with a patronizing, paternal tone. “In sixteen eighty, there was no United States, Helbent.”

Helbent’s patience expired. “Now, *listen*, Houston, I know you engineering types are weak on history, but *I* am not. I have in my memory banks—along with Gerber’s *Decline and Fall of the Carthaginian Empire*—Henry Iron Commanger’s *Complete History of the United States*. Volume one deals with the Founding Fathers, Washington, Jefferson and our first President, Schwartz, recounting their heroic labors in fifteen twenty-one—*fifteen twenty-one*, Houston. You do know the names of the Founding Fathers, don’t you?”

“Schwartz doesn’t ring a bell.”

“It *should*, the Harry S. Therman of his day, one of the truly great figures in human history. I shall read, for your edification and education, from Professor Commanger’s history. It will, I am sure, make more sense than what you’ve been blathering.” Helbent began reading volume one to Houston.

Houston tried to interrupt.

“What is it *now*, Houston?”

“I think we’re having difficulty communicating.”

Mentally, Helbent checked all his equipment. Everything seemed in tact. "It's all on your end, Houston. Systems check shows no malfunction."

"That isn't what I meant. You say you come from Earth."

"I *do* come from Earth."

"You say you come from the United States."

"A gen-u-wine native son."

"Then you're human."

"Of *course* I'm not human. If I were human, I would have been back here with the rest of you lily-livered ingrates instead of a hundred and twenty light years out in space almost getting my ascent engine shot off. Now, I'm getting extremely tired of answering these inane questions. Can we move on to something else? Something sensible?"

"Like what?"

"Like what you want me to *do*."

"Hold on."

Hold on. Get to the crux of the matter and Houston says hold on. He was beginning to think the First Folio edition of Darwin's *Origin of the Genus* was wrong. What goes up must come down. In three hundred years, humanity—at least that part of it represented by Houston—had evidently begun the long descent back to primordial slime.

Helbent switched on the commercial frequency to kill time. Walter and Wally were still talking. Eric, whom Helbent wished would take over Houston ground-control, was unavailable.

"Walter."

"Yes, Wally."

"With this new data—both the Soviet and American

vehicles utterly destroyed and Houston saying the thing claims Earth—”

“Claims to be from Earth, Wally. They aren’t exactly the same thing.”

“Still, Walter, it’s a distinction without a difference. If the thing *thinks* it belongs here, for whatever reason, if our ICBM’s are to it as wanton flies to boys—”

“I think the phrase is ‘flies to wanton boys,’ Wally. Maybe Eric would know.” Walter pressed an earphone further into his ear. “Eric?”

“I’m here, Walter. The phrase is from . . .”

Wally, anxious, reached over and grabbed Walter’s lapels, shaking the older man.

“Listen to me, Walter. This is important.”

“. . . Shakespeare,” concluded Eric.

“I’m listening, Wally.”

“Maybe, Walter, if they can do all that, maybe we should give up.”

Walter looked stunned. “Give up?”

“It swatted aside our boys like wanton *flies*, Walter!” Wally shook Walter. “Like wanton *flies*!”

“You’re getting hysterical, Wally. Where’s that famous astronaut’s calm?”

Wally released Walter, dropping his head to the table and supporting it with his forearm, sobbing audibly. “*Gone! Gone! Everything’s gone!*”

Walter looked at the camera. “Let’s see what Eric (*transmission garbled*) has to say about that. Eric?”

At last, thought Helbent, sense.

The distinguished man came on the screen. “Wally, I’m going to have to disagree with your analysis. The thing fired

only in self-defence. True, it destroyed our best defenses. True, that demonstrates a technical capability far superior to our own. True, NASA reports the thing has a surly attitude. But, it continues to talk. It seems open to reasoned debate. My decision would be to continue that debate, to learn from a superior culture. Properly handled, mankind might well make a quantum leap into the future. Back to you, Walter.”

Helbent switched off to think. Somewhere in Eric’s commentary, Helbent had picked up a thought. He wanted to ponder it. “Computer, what is the probability that Walter and Wally—and especially Eric—were referring, not to Space-things or winged Phantasmagoria, but me?”

Ninty-nine point nine eight percent.

“That high?”

Affirmative.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you be that positive about anything.”

The computer remained silent, responsive only to questions or orders.

“What’s the probability this civilization has been degenerating for three hundred years?”

Insufficient data—unempirical estimate below point oh-oh-oh-one percent.

Abruptly, an idea—intuitive, unanalyzed, yet convincing—forced its way into Helbent’s musing, exactly the kind of idea his designers had hoped to stimulate by separating the squelching and critical faculty of the computer from Helbent’s sterling creative imagination. What if—“Computer, what is the probability of finding a second planet in our Galaxy—no, strike that. In our *universe*—I might as well think big—a second planet with the same biological

evolution as Earth's, the same socio-cultural-linguistic evolution, the same geophysical characteristics, *but*—this is important computer, so pay attention—an evolution on all levels three hundred years behind Earth prime, a dwarfed, stunted, pigmy Earth, historio-culturally speaking?”

The computer responded immediately, plopping out a decimal point followed by a string of zeros so long Helbent lost count. The sequence terminated with a “one to the minus,” another enormous figure.

“That small, huh?”

Affirmative.

Helbent pondered. It made less sense than Wally and Walter. Either two Earths existed—accounting for the primitive state of present human technology, the jumbled and inaccurate version of their history, as well as the biological dysfunction he suspected in their brains—or—or what?”

“I need *data*, dammit, *raw data*.”

He tried to reach the Library of Congress on the standard frequency. No response. He relocated over Washington and switched to high power optical observation, penetrating the cloud layer, searching out the Library of Congress, peering in through a dirty window.

“Books?”

Helbent shuddered. With an information retrieval system that clumsy, he would need the next three hundred years to find even basic facts. Imagination sapped, he abandoned the task. He sat in space, mind ruminating. When all else failed—when even imagination failed—he still had one alternative; brute logic.

“Computer, read out every possibility capable of explaining our current situation. Give me the probability of each.”

The computer hesitated. In three hundred years, Helbent

had never known the computer to hesitate. Malfunction?

“Systems check.”

All systems go.

“Then why the *hell* are you sitting around here on your flip-flops? Flip or flop, but get on the stick. This is an order, computer. Prepare to read out! Reeceead *OUT!*”

The computer read out, a momentous rush of probabilities and possibilities, an inundation, a deluge. Data of incredible complexity blew through Helbent’s mind like a hurricane, bending biosynthetic synapses like palm trees.

Slowly, Helbent adjusted. He began looking for only high probability explanations. One rushed past. He snatched it from the torrent. He waited, enduring the storm, for another.

None appeared.

Abruptly, the data storm abated and died.

“That’s it?”

Readout complete.

Helbent stared at the sole, high probability explanation in disbelief. So simple! So obvious! Had he been capable of wearing a cap, snatching it from his head, flinging it to the ground and stomping on it, he would have done so. “That *damn* warpstorm! If they told me *once*, they must have told me a *million* times to watch out for those damn things.”

He degenerated into several nanoseconds of cursing, some of it expressible only in binary.

“All right, so a warpstorm disoriented me near Wolff 25c. So the only high probability explanation suggests I slipped through the gap left when the warpstorm excised a black hole, squeezing me out of one universe and into another. So I arrived back at this technologically—probably intellectually—retarded Earth. So what?”

Helbent pondered.

Houston broke in. "Mr. Helbent, this is Houston. What is your purpose here, your mission?"

Helbent, now fully aware of mankind's abysmal ignorance, answered flatly, cooperatively. "Save humanity."

"From what?"

Though tempted to say itself, he answered, "Spacethings, but since they have been destroyed—" Helbent broke off in mid-sentence, an idea forming in his mind. In his own universe, the Spacethings have been destroyed. As the sole veteran of the battle, he could testify to it.

But here, in this universe—

He looked in the direction of Sagittarius. Indeed, the binary home of the Spacethings existed in this universe, a faint speck with a white dwarf companion. If, as he now believed, he had arrived at a different Earth in a different universe—a universe centuries out of joint with his own, an intellectually retrograde universe—confrontation with *this* universe's Spacethings lay in the future.

"Mr. Helbent?"

"What?" snapped Helbent, irritated at the interruption to his ponderings.

"What's a Spacething?"

Hypothesis confirmed. Helbent made up his mind. He felt a surge of new energy. No longer a pointless creation, he felt his sense of direction and purpose return. He looked toward Sagittarius and experienced something like love. Out there, beyond the reach of Houston's paltry imagination, stood an entire universe, vast and beautiful, full of Spacethings waiting to be killed.

He turned his attention to Houston. No time to lose. Three hundred years, he had read somewhere, constituted only a

blink of the cosmic eye. Spacethings would be there before anyone knew it. “Listen, Houston, do you people have some kind of ground recording system? Wire recorders? Record players? Little men with clay tablets?”

“Yes.”

“O.K. Get your styli going on the tablets. I’m going to tell you about Spacethings.”

Helbent told them, in gruesome detail, tales of demands and appeasements, battles and conquests—finally, the awesome 2.478 nanosecond clash of empires. Anti-climactically, he added a short account of the long journey home, the warp-storm, his arrival.

When he finished, his emotions strained to the limit by the experiences he had forced himself to relive, Houston failed to respond.

“Houston?”

“Wait five, Helbent. We’re thinking.”

“*Thinking! Thinking!* Isn’t the picture clear enough? Do I have to spell it out for you? *You, mankind, Earth*—all are in mortal *danger*. You must, immediately, divert every resource into combating this imminent and immanent menace. Do you understand that?”

Houston took the entire five minutes. “We have reached our decision.”

“Thank NASA.”

“We intend to fight.”

Helbent heaved a sigh of relief.

“Though initially we wished to pursue the path of reason, our President—consulting directly with world leaders and advised by the world’s most distinguished scientists—has decided to resist.”

Helbent beamed with pride and satisfaction.

“Frankly, your tale of interstellar empires and conquests, warpstorms and final battles—interesting and ingenious a fabrication as it is—”

“Fabrication!”

“—won’t hold water.”

“Won’t hold—Now, wait just a minute, Houston—”

“*You* wait just a minute. Our top scientists assure us such a transfer between universes, even assuming other universes exist—cannot occur. Your story is a charade, a ruse, a trick to gain our confidence before you—”

“A charade! A ruse!”

“You have five minutes to break orbit and clear out of our solar system. If you refuse, those two missiles—missiles, I might add, that our experts tell us you were lucky enough to destroy only because they came at you one at a time—will prove only a sample of our fateful lightning, our swift sword. Anything and everything capable of doing damage—from multi-warhead nuclear weapons to .22 bullets—will be used. We will fight you on the beaches, in the field and in the town. We will fight you in the cities, if we have to, underground.”

Helbent, who had never cared much for verse, tried to interrupt.

Houston continued. “The men of Earth—of mine own land—will fight you o’er the planet, for every grain of sand.”

“That won’t be necessary, Houston.”

“You have,” declared Houston, “five minutes.”

Houston’s carrier left the air.

Helbent spent the five minutes thinking, mulling over possibilities and probabilities. He considered breaking orbit

and following orders. The orders, after all, had come from human beings. Still, though he admired the fighting spirit behind the orders, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt the folly of carrying them out. If he broke orbit, he would abandon mankind, at least this mankind in this universe. They would be left to molder in their retarded culture until this universe's Spacethings came to crush them under an iron tentacle.

At the end of five minutes, what looked to Helbert like a miniature armada lifted off from Earth, missiles firing from silos across the United States, submarines across the seas and gantries across the Soviet Union. Gradually, they approached, converging on him. Helbert turned the job of tracking and destroying the creeping missiles over to the computer, leaving his own mind free to think.

He took the problem step by step, logically. These creatures—the idea of their profaning the name of human annoyed him—seemed bound and determined to repel him. That they had no means to do so, that their technological arsenal had taken only one short step beyond the sharp stick, that their capacity to go further might be doubted by any reasonable mind, never occurred to them. (Missiles and warheads exploded harmlessly around him.)

Still, he found himself unable to break orbit and abandon the fools to their folly. Besides, the more he thought about it (a fifty kiloton warhead detonated nearby, jostling the ship but otherwise leaving it undamaged), the more he realized that breaking orbit would be to simultaneously break his prime directive.

A plan, he needed one. He had to convince them of the danger ahead. He had to convince them to act immediately, to

prepare, technologically and psychologically, for the inevitable Spacething invasion. Something Eric had said came back to him: “. . . Properly handled, mankind might well make a quantum leap into the future.”

It made sense, the only sense Helbent had heard recently. Yet the sense it made chilled him. It went against everything ingrained in his memory banks, against every directive but the prime directive. To accomplish it, he would have to do things unheard of, undreamt of, unplanned for by his designers. He would have to reverse every fiber of his soldier's psychology, give up the keystone of his pride, the core of his identity—he would have to return to Earth not victor but vanquished.

Still, quantum leaps were quantum leaps.

Helbent picked his target and fed in the coordinants: “Prepare to break orbit. Prepare for entry and touchdown.”

For a second time in three hundred years, the computer hesitated. For the first time in three hundred years, it asked a question. *Are you malfunctioning?*

“Listen, you insubordinate piece of impure silicon, do as I say. I am *not* malfunctioning. And I want those coordinants hit exactly—on the button—right on top of the Capital rotunda. Got it?”

The computer had it. They broke orbit and started down. Though built in space and never designed to enter an atmosphere, a quick probability check indicated most of the equipment—armaments, power systems, basic ship's library—would make it to the surface with little damage. Only the control center—Helbent and most of the computer—would fuse from the heat. On impact, the ship would split like a coconut. From the wreckage—from his corpse—mankind would take away its quantum technological leap. Perhaps,

during three hundred years, they could even build better ships. Helbent wished he could meet them. His duty demanded otherwise. From his bones, crucified atop capital hill, mankind would take salvation.

Helbent opened all communications channels to Earth, shouting into them.

“Whaaa-whooo, you lily-livered, sap-sucking gophers! It’s me, the terrible Spacething! I’m a mean son of a bitch and I’m coming to get you! You better get your asses in gear because I ain’t alone! There’s a million more out there where I come from and in three hundred years we’re gonna crack this planet like a peanut! Whaaa-whooo, you lily-livered.

The outer hull began to glow, visible in the night sky over Earth.

Jenson's Folly

"You will hurt your brain, *señor*."

Jenson ignored him, continuing to doodle equations on the dusty tabletop, intricate and complicated equations that never converged. Several times, stymied, he moved to a fresh area of untouched dust, wiping the smudge from his fingertip before he began. Juan, Jenson's day guard, his sombrero pushed back on his head and two bandoleers crossed on his chest, peered over Jenson's shoulder, squinting through the smoke of a cigarette stub plugged between his lips. Juan reached over Jenson's shoulder, pointing at the equations.

"Why you do that?"

"What?" said Jenson, thinking Juan had noticed some error in his calculations.

"Arithmetic."

"Kicks."

"Kicks? What is kicks?" Juan withdrew his hand.

"Fun."

"You have one funny idea of fun, *señor*."

Silently, Jenson agreed. His sabbatical year, teaching at the University of Mexico, was supposed to be fun. It had been misery. The teaching, at times, was fun. The students were eager. Yet the whole reason for the sabbatical—to shelve his research project for a year and let his mind try for a new perspective—had failed. His work dogged him like a predator, lurking behind every thought. He was so close to a solution he could almost feel it physically, an object grasped in the dark. Frequently, he awoke in the middle of the night with the answer on his lips. By the time he got a pencil and paper, it

was gone. Halfway through the school year, unable to abstain any longer, he sent for his equipment.

"How you know when it is finished?" asked Juan.

"The series converges."

"What you have then?"

"Zero."

"*¡Cero!*" Juan laughed and stood up. "You do *that* for a *cero*? You are one loco fella, *señor*."

"Probably."

Juan returned to his guardpost in front of Jenson and near the door. An M-16 rifle leaned against a plastic packing case next to him. He picked it up and began wiping the action with a rag, muttering something about *gringos locos*. Jenson looked at his equation. Another dead end. He bounced his fist off the table, and stood up.

"Damn this thing!"

"*¡Cuidado!*" said Juan, suddenly alert. He gestured with the rifle for Jenson to sit down. "Do not make the quick motions, *señor*."

Jenson remembered where he was and sat down. If only he had some paper—or better yet, a blackboard—things would go more quickly. He was running out of dust.

"*Señor*, you must not move so quickly. I have the orders, you know."

"Can you get me some paper?"

"Paper?"

"So I can go on with my work."

"Paper is not in the orders."

"The hell with your—" began Jenson vigorously, but Juan leveled the rifle at him and he softened his tone. "I mean, can't you make an exception?"

"There are no exceptions. All are treated in the same way."

“How many other prisoners do you have?”

“Just you.”

“If you only have one prisoner and you give him paper and pencil, you will be treating them all alike.”

“*Muy lógico, señor, pero*—excuse me—but I have the orders and the orders say nothing of paper and pencils and you, if you will remember it yourself, have volunteered to be our guest.”

Jenson remembered “volunteering.” He was returning to the University of California at Berkeley from the University of Mexico, planning to stop over in Tucson and visit his sister. He was making better time than he expected, letting the turbine Porsche out to a hundred and sixty on any straight stretches of road he encountered. Between Hermosillo and Nogales, he slowed for a goat herd. A tire blew, causing him to skid onto the dusty shoulder of the road. He got out and fixed it. Only when the spare was in place did he notice the bullet hole in the old tire. He looked up from the tire. A half-dozen men in sarapes with rifles surrounded him. One of them, a short man with a tall sombrero and drooping mustachios, stepped forward.

“*Buenos días, señor.*”

“*Buenos días.*”

The man said something too fast for Jenson’s limited Spanish. When he got no answer, he switched to English.

“It is a nice car that you have, *señor.*”

“Thanks.”

“What does it cost?”

“About thirty thousand, new.”

“Thirty thousand. That is not much.”

"Dollars, not pesos."

"Ahhh," said the man, smiling and nodding to accent his understanding. An even row of white teeth showed in the middle of the mustachios, punctuated by a black gap where an incisor should have been. He snapped an order to his men. One of them opened the driver's side and got in.

"Hey!"

"Hey, yourself, *señor*."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking your car." The man waited for a reaction. When he got none, he burst into laughter, long snorting laughter that turned into a coughing spasm. After some final sputtering, he controlled himself.

"The revolution is not good for the health."

"How am I supposed to get to Nogales?"

The man smiled, but avoided laughing.

"Walk, *señor*."

"Walk!"

"It is good for health." He turned to his men. "*¡Vámonos, hombres!*"

The man in the driver's seat started the engine.

"Wait a minute."

"Wait a minute?" The leader stepped up to Jenson, bringing his face within inches of Jenson's. He grinned, his missing tooth prominently absent. "Do you know to whom you have the pleasure of addressing?"

"Genghis Khan."

The comment set off another bout of coughing, doubling the man. He repeated it to his men, who laughed, except the driver, who was practicing at the wheel of the motionless car,

jerking the wheel from side to side as if working his way to the head of the pack at Le Mans. Finally the leader returned to his scrutiny of Jenson's eyes.

"No."

"Who then?"

"Who who?"

"To whom do I have the pleasure of addressing," said Jenson, annoyed enough to mimic the man.

"Me."

"Oh? And just who are you?"

"El Buitre."

"The bandit. I should have—"

"*¡Bandido!*" blurted El Buitre. His eyebrows went up, mock incredulity on his face. "*¡Bandido! No, no, señor, Político!*"

"*Sí, sí,*" agreed El Buitre's men, except the driver, who was paying no attention to the conversation.

Conspiratorially, El Buitre lowered his voice, moving even closer to Jenson.

"You know what this is?"

"What?"

"El Buitre," whispered El Buitre.

"No."

"The vul-toor." El Buitre paused, stroking his mustachios before he looked up at Jenson. "It is a fearsohm bird, the vul-toor, no?"

"Fearsome."

El Buitre threw back his head and laughed, a growling laugh with shining eyes, simultaneously loosing a quick left jab into Jenson's stomach. Jenson gasped and collapsed. Dust settled gently around him. He struggled for breath.

"*Muchachos*—" began El Buitre.

"No!" gasped Jenson.

El Buitre glared at him. "No. You tempt the fates, *señor*."

Jenson regained some of his breath.

"You can have the car . . ."

"Of course I can have the car."

". . . but please let me keep the papers and equipment in the back seat."

"Back seat?" said El Buitre and peered through the back window. "What is it in the back seat?"

"My work."

"What do El Buitre care for your work? He does not. *¡Muchachos!*"

Jenson got to his feet. The briefcase and working model in the back seat were his lifework. It would take years to duplicate it.

"If you take my work, you'll have to take me, too."

El Buitre smiled.

They threw Jenson in a storeroom at El Buitre's camp, more a permanent village than a camp. At night, José, Juan's brother, guarded him. Only Juan spoke English. The ransom, Jenson was told, would be set at fifty thousand dollars, though El Buitre was willing to bargain.

"And if you don't get it?" Jenson had asked.

"We shoot you."

II

ON THE THIRD DAY OF HIS CAPTIVITY, Jenson's mind recovered enough to be bored. He coped with the boredom by doodling math in the dust. When he had almost exhausted the dust, the storeroom door flew open, rebounding from the corrugated

iron wall with a metallic clang and narrowly missing Juan, who snapped to something like attention. El Buitre stomped in, his boots clomping on the wooden floor, and skidded a newspaper across the tabletop to Jenson, obliterating the morning's work.

"Is that you?"

"Is who me?"

"That," said El Buitre, poking at a picture on the front page of the paper with a stubby index finger. "*Este hombre ahí.*"

Jenson looked at the picture, centered on the page, nodding. It was his picture, or more accurately a ten-year-old college graduation picture.

"It's me."

"*El físico?*"

"Yes."

"Is it true what they say?"

"You got me."

"*Correcto.* I have got you. But is it true what they say?"

"What do they say?"

El Buitre jabbed the paper. "Read him!"

Jenson started on the story under the picture, laboriously sounding out the Spanish words. Communicating with his students had been easy. They used a combination of English, Spanish, mathematics and physics. Reading a newspaper entirely in Spanish was something else again, even if he did know the subject of the article somewhat better than the reporter.

"I am waiting, *señor.*"

Jenson continued reading. After several suppositions about how he fell into El Buitre's hands—all wrong—the story went

on to list his various distinctions plus a few rumors about the Nobel Prize.

"I see you upped the ante."

"*¿Perdone, señor?*" El Buitre said.

"You're asking sixty thousand."

"One must leave room for the bargain."

Jenson finished the article. "It's correct, except for the part about you."

"It says you are working on the—how do you call it? Transmitter of the material."

"Matter transmitter."

"*¿Sí, es verdad?*"

"Yes."

El Buitre was silent, considering the idea. He stroked his mustachios. After several seconds of contemplation, he began pacing back and forth in front of the table, holding his chin and watching his path. He stopped abruptly and glanced at Jenson.

"Will it transmit the animals?"

"In theory it will transmit anything—animal, vegetable or mineral."

"*¡Bueno!*"

El Buitre paced again, his boots thudding hollowly on the floor. Jenson and Juan watched him. El Buitre paused every now and then to eye Jenson and shake his head. It occurred to Jenson that El Buitre was having pangs of conscience. If he were forced to execute Jenson, the world-renowned physicist, it would look bad for the cause, whatever the cause was—El Buitre, probably. It might also deprive the world of Jenson's potential achievements. Jenson discarded the idea, recog-

nizing it as vanity trying to console him when nothing else was available. A more likely explanation for El Buitre's pensiveness was the ransom. With a well-known physicist in hand, rather than simply a passing tourist, the price was probably going up.

"Those things in the car, they are it, the transmitter of material?"

"A model."

"A model that works?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

Jenson gave up speculating about El Buitre's thoughts. Whatever the man was thinking would have to appear in its own time.

"I can't."

"Why?"

"No electricity."

"You think we are *primitivos, señor físico?*" El Buitre pointed toward a socket near the base of the wall, unnoticed by Jenson. Every evening, Jose brought a kerosene lantern with him when he relieved Juan. Jenson had assumed there was no electricity. "What does that look like? The trap for the mouse?"

El Buitre said something to Juan, who bolted from the storeroom. After several minutes, Jenson heard an engine cough and catch. It whined a moment before it settled to a low rumble.

"You hear that, *señor?*"

Jenson nodded.

"*Mi generador.*"

After a few more minutes, Juan returned with Jenson's

equipment and briefcase, struggling under the awkward load of the transmitter carrying case, a three-foot plywood box with leather handles on both ends and the top.

"Careful."

Juan put the box on the table and dropped the briefcase. Jenson opened the box, examining the contents to make sure everything was there. He extracted a concrete disk a foot in diameter with a nine-inch hole in the center. Embedded in the concrete was a tantalum bar, used to focus the transmitter into a one-inch circle in the vacant center of the ring. The concrete itself was Jenson's substitute for a ground, an essential for stability. In any larger model, the focusing ring would have to be partially buried in the earth or risk an unstable field in the ring and permanent dematerialization. The ring was flat on one edge. Jenson rested the ring on the end of the table.

"What is that thing in the box?"

"A computer, among other things."

"What does it compute?"

"It's a feedback system to stabilize the field inside the ring."

El Buitre peered through the ring at Jenson. "I see no field."

"It's invisible."

"Oh."

Jenson pulled the feedback system out of the box, essentially a commercially built digital computer with a minimum of analog circuits to make decisions, modified for Jenson's purposes. Attached to the rear of the stabilizing computer was an energy converter and modulator, allowing objects passed through the ring to be converted into a stream of subnuclear particles and reassembled at the focal point. Jenson's model

had only a two-foot range. He attached an inch-thick cable to a connector on the ring, then handed a line cord to Juan.

“Plug this in.”

Jenson had done much of the prototype development in his apartment in Berkeley and designed the transmitter to operate on house current, though he occasionally kicked out a circuit breaker when he tried to pass large objects through the ring.

Juan stuck the plug into the socket. Jenson flipped up a safety cover on a toggle switch and activated the transmitter. The generator outside died.

“*Qué pasó?*”

“Not enough power.”

“Power? We have plen-ty of power,” said El Buitre, waving his arms around as if the world were filled with power, then yelled something at Juan, who rushed from the room, leaving his rifle leaning against a crate. Jenson looked at the rifle.

“Do not even think of it. I have four hundred men outside.”

The generator started, this time at a higher idle.

“*Bueno. Continuáremos.*”

Jenson activated the transmitter again. The generator kept running.

“Do you have something small I can use to demonstrate with?”

El Buitre pulled a bullet from one of the ammunition belts across his chest.

“Something nonexplosive.”

“You said he would work on anything.”

“In theory.”

El Buitre replaced the cartridge and pulled a ball-point pen from his pants pocket.

“This?”

"Fine."

Jenson took the pen and slowly pushed it into the center of the ring. The pen barrel disappeared, as if submerging in water.

"Where he go?"

Jenson nodded toward the opposite end of the table. El Buitre's eyes enlarged.

"He sticks out here!"

The pen barrel had materialized over the table two feet from the center of the ring.

"Why does he stand in the air?"

"Because I'm holding on to it," answered Jenson, indicating the retractor end of the pen between his fingers.

"If you let go—what then?"

"It depends. If more of it's on my side, it will fall back this way. Otherwise, it will all come out where the point is."

El Buitre held both hands in front of him as if measuring a distance.

"Not fifty-fifty?" he asked.

"No."

"What if the power go off?"

"There's enough residual energy to let anything in the field get through."

Jenson pushed the pen and let go. It appeared in the air two feet away and dropped to the tabletop, clattering and rolling toward the edge. El Buitre plucked it up and examined it, scrutinizing it at close range. The generator died. Juan came back into the storeroom with a supplicating expression on his face, launching into an explanation of why the generator stopped.

"*Cállak!*"

Juan was silent. El Buitre gazed off into a corner of the storeroom, scratching his chin. Finally he looked up.

"*Bueno!*"

"*Bueno*, what?"

"You want to leave here, do you not?"

"Yes."

"You may go."

"Thank you," said Jenson, standing up. He began unscrewing the connector from the ring. "I—"

"If—"

"If what?"

"If," said El Buitre, pointing at the transmitter, "you make me one of those."

"Impossible."

"Nothing is impossible."

"You can have that one." Jenson nodded toward his briefcase. "If I can have my papers."

"Do you think I want a toy?" El Buitre held his hands wide apart. "I want a beeg one."

"How big?"

"As beeg as this room."

"You're nuts."

"Perhaps, *señor*, but that is the price of your freedom."

"We'll all be here a long time if that's the price. I've been working on the problem of how to make a large transmitter for over a year. Day and night, for a year. It simply cannot be—" Suddenly Jenson saw it, the solution he had wanted for a year.

"Pencil."

"*Qué?*"

"Pencil, damn it, pencil!"

"*Lápiz y papel*," snapped El Buitre. "*Vamos!*"

Juan riffled Jenson's briefcase, at last coming up with a mechanical pencil and blank paper. Jenson sat down at the table and pushed the transmitter to one side to make room to write. For a year he had searched for a solution, for the mathematical expression of his matter transmitter, an expression that could be extrapolated into a larger transmitter. For a year, it had eluded his every effort. He wrote rapidly, covering the sheet on both sides with mathematical expressions and phrases. Why so simple a solution had evaded him, he was unable to say. Instead of the series converging, it was infinite. As if completing a letter with a period, he bounced the pencil point off the paper and sat back.

"It can be done."

"*Bueno!* We will do it."

"But—"

"No buts."

III

THE PROJECT WOULD BE DIFFICULT even in a sophisticated scientific community. In a Mexican mountain village, where women still ground corn for tortillas on large flat stones, it would be impossible. Since there were no "buts," Jenson decided to convince El Buitre by showing him. He began work on the designs.

Days passed. The pile of designs on his table in the storeroom multiplied. They let him out for an hour a day, heavily escorted by guards. On one of his walks, he noticed that the village—a collection of corrugated iron buildings and tents—was well camouflaged. There was little chance of being seen from the air.

The more Jenson got into the project, the more he enjoyed

it. He could have faked the designs. No one in El Buitre's camp knew a neutrino from a burrito. The real work had to be done sometime. The present seemed ideal. No one bothered him. He was well fed. He was content to work.

Since it was impossible to actually construct the transmitter, Jenson designed with abandon, choosing the most expensive materials and grandiose construction. El Buitre wanted a "beeg one." Jenson would design a "beeg one." To construct a transmitter with a twelve-foot projection surface, it was necessary to design a ring one hundred and forty-four feet in diameter. Sixty-four feet of it would be underground. The protruding arch would rise eighty feet in the air. With some satisfaction, Jenson wondered how El Buitre would camouflage it. He estimated the cost of the tantalum alone at half a million, dollars not pesos.

El Buitre, inspecting the designs a month later, said simply, "*Bueno.*"

"*¡Bueno!* Do you realize how much this will cost?"

"Make the list of your needs."

It took a day to write the material list. It was one of Jenson's better days. He would blithely write something on the paper, then burst into uncontrollable laughter, contorted at the idea of El Buitre trying to buy it. When he finished the list, he gave it to the bandit.

"How do you plan to get this stuff?" asked Jenson. "Sears Roebuck?"

El Buitre folded the list and tucked it into a pocket somewhere under his red sarape, then looked up, grinning as he spoke.

"Steal it."

Jenson followed El Buitre's exploits in newspapers supplied by Juan. A train was derailed near Guaymas and its reactor stolen to replace the inadequate gas engine generator. Twenty of El Buitre's men died of radiation sickness carrying the pieces back to camp. Jenson shook his head over the paper, regretting his inability to instruct El Buitre any other way.

Reports, both in the newspapers and from Juan, got worse. Without thinking, Jenson mentioned the inadequacy of the computer used with his model transmitter to stabilize a larger transmitter. The quantity of information alone would overload it before it ever got to analyzing the information. A few nights later, an analog computer system was borrowed from a factory in Chihuahua, carted over the Sierra Madre Occidental in pieces, and presented to Jenson.

"What was the cost?" asked Jenson.

"Cost?"

"In men," said Jenson. "At the factory."

"Only the graveyard shift."

When Jenson overcame his repugnance at the computer's price, he spent some of his time working out a program to match his designs. One would have to be worked out anyway. When El Buitre finally saw the impossibility of his plan, Jenson would have a copy of the program in his briefcase. Besides, working took his mind off the raids.

The government in Mexico City was panic stricken. For the first time since the days of Francisco Madero's entry into Mexico City, the electorate was muttering change. The conservative National Revolutionary Party was bloating its rhetoric to no avail. Speculation was giving way to fear. Why was El Buitre taking what he took? What did it mean? When

four hundred banditos swept into Chihuahua and left with a computer, it was news, but news no one could interpret. There were printed rumors that El Buitre's gang was increasing. People were said to be joining just to find out what was going on.

Jenson read about small massacres. A concrete factory in Ciudad Obregon was sacked, leaving ten men dead and two cement mixers demolished. An electronics warehouse in Mazatlan was looted. Four men died. A bulldozer disappeared in Puerto Peñasco. A gas station in Topolobampo was pumped dry.

"A gas station?" said Jenson, looking up from the paper.

"We move quickly, *señor*," said Juan. "We must have gasoline. You think we use the burros?"

Reports trickled in of plundering in Guadalajara, tourists fleeing before an army of ten thousand, though El Buitre had nowhere near that many men. Zacatecas and Tehuantepec, even Merida in the Yucatan, reported raids—all disclaimed by El Buitre, who complained of shoddy journalism. He said he never got farther south than the state of Navarit.

Fall changed to winter. It snowed briefly in the mountains. A stove was installed in Jenson's storeroom. As the materials mounted, dark circles began to appear under El Buitre's eyes and his cough got worse. If the revolution demanded his health, he commented to Jenson one day after a particularly bad coughing spell, he must give it.

The bandit horde was now two thousand strong and unruly. Once El Buitre shot it out with one of his lieutenants, a man who wanted to abandon the matter transmitter altogether and concentrate on pillaging. El Buitre unhesitatingly shot the man, lamenting the necessity for it only after he checked for a

pulse. El Buitre spent more and more of his time with Jenson, complaining about the problems of command. Several times Jenson tried to reason with him about the matter transmitter. El Buitre only eyed him suspiciously, evidently thinking Jenson had sold out to some faction among his men. Some of the men, especially those loyal to the dead lieutenant, thought El Buitre was mad. Why build matter transmitters, they reasoned, when there was looting to be done?

"They do not understand, Federico," said El Buitre, who had taken to calling Jenson by something like his first name. "They have no vision, no view of the future. Robbing and killing is O.K. for today, but what of tomorrow? *Mañana*. We must think of *mañana*."

"It's lonely at the top," remarked Jenson.

Sometime during the winter, Jenson began to believe El Buitre was a real revolutionary. It chilled him more than the weather. Bandits were predictable. They wanted booty. When they got it, they went home happy. You could deal with a bandit. Fanatics, on the other hand, committed to their own unalterable vision of *mañana*, were not only unpredictable but resolute. No deals deterred them. They kept their eyes fixed on a distant star while their hands cut a bloody path through any careless chunks of humanity that got in their way.

Jenson had pangs of guilt. He felt responsible for those who died, from banditos to factory workers. He had tried to show El Buitre the folly of building the transmitter. It accomplished the opposite. Materiel mounted, El Buitre's band increased, an unprecedented crime wave swept western Mexico—all due to Jenson's own mistaken notion of the best way to instruct El Buitre. He should have refused from the

beginning, refused and been shot. At night he dreamed of the dead men, each sent to his doom by Jenson's folly, marching into heaven through a gigantic concrete ring.

Yet, as the days wore on and more of the materiel arrived, Jenson doubted the impossibility of building the matter transmitter. It was a small doubt at first, easily brushed aside. After all, there was still the insurmountable problem of the tantalum.

One day El Buitre, large bags under each eye and twenty pounds lighter than when they first met, walked into the storeroom and spread out a map on Jenson's work table, pointing at it.

"Do you know this place, Federico?"

"Tucson."

"The tantalum will be there Tuesday. It is being shipped from San Diego to Hous-tone."

Jenson imagined El Buitre's horde in Tucson, burning, sacking, killing. He pictured his sister in the ruins, dismembered or worse.

"Oh, no! My sister lives in Tucson."

"I will say hello if we see her. This is my plan."

El Buitre outlined a plan, a quick pincer movement into the railroad yards at Tucson. Jenson was incredulous. Bovine Mexico was one thing, but lupine America was something else.

"You'll never get away with it."

"*¿Por qué?*"

"Because the United States Government is not the Mexican Government."

"You are right. It is beeger." El Buitre grinned. "Like the dinosaur."

"Remember General Pershing," Jenson said.

"Who?"

"Never mind. This plan is insane."

"They will never know what it is that has hit them."

"They didn't," said Jenson, watching the men unload tantalum from the back of a truck. It arrived with a construction engineer named Harold Wright, a man about El Buitre's size who refused to say anything to Jenson for three days, insisting on his rights as an American citizen, whatever he supposed them to be.

With the arrival of the tantalum, Jenson was convinced. The transmitter was possible. His only decision was whether to make the attempt. The men who died to collect the material, and those who died at the hands of the collectors, were dead. Refusing to go ahead would only add another name to their numbers, his own. If he refused El Buitre would certainly shoot him. If he failed, El Buitre would no doubt shoot him. Even if he succeeded, El Buitre would probably shoot him. There was little choice.

Convincing Wright to cooperate proved more difficult than convincing himself. When Wright finally believed Jenson was Jenson, the missing physicist, he was even more recalcitrant. He would sit on his stool in the corner of the storeroom muttering, "turncoat," "Benedict Arnold," "Quisling." El Buitre, Jenson tried to explain one day when he heard the bandit approaching outside, would use something more than sweet reason. The door burst open.

"How is the frog today?" said El Buitre, walking toward Jenson at the table and indicating Wright with a nod of his head.

Jenson glanced at Wright, who was sitting resolutely in the

corner, staring straight ahead with a thin-lipped determination to remain silent. Wright's face, wide-mouthed with hyperthyroidal eyes, did faintly resemble a frog's.

"Very quiet," answered Jenson.

"He no talk?"

"Not to me."

"He will talk to El Buitre," said El Buitre, turning to Wright. "You will not only talk to El Buitre, *señor* engin'er, you will work for him, or your life will not be worth *that!*" El Buitre spit on the floor.

"Messy," said Jenson.

"*Que?*"

"Nothing."

Wright was silent, avoiding everyone's eyes. El Buitre walked over and planted himself squarely in front of the engineer, legs apart.

"Talk!"

He slapped Wright twice. Wright looked up, his bulbous eyes gleaming with intensity.

"Creep."

"Creep? What is that, creep?"

"You're not getting word one out of me!" said Wright. "I demand to see the American ambassador!"

"We have no ambassador."

"The consul."

"We have no consul."

"An attache?"

El Buitre grabbed Wright's shirtfront, lifting him partially off the stool and staring into his eyes.

"Listen to me, gringo pig—"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No! No choice. You will work for me or I will feed your insides to the coyotes!"

Wright, his chin obscured by his distended shirtfront, seemed unimpressed. Jenson, on the other hand, was impressed, both by El Buitre's threat and Wright's defiance of it. Wright was doing what Jenson should have done from the beginning. Unfortunately, in Jenson's opinion, it was too late for defiance, noble as was the gesture. El Buitre was committed to the matter transmitter. He would stop at nothing to achieve his goal. Defiance must give way to cunning. Jenson chewed on his lip, calculating how best to use the situation. Though Jenson considered himself cunning enough in his own right, two heads were better than one. He would need Wright's help. El Buitre must be dissuaded from violence and Wright persuaded to work. Only working, would they have time to devise a plan.

El Buitre shook Wright, emphasizing his point.

"While you are still alive!"

The bandit dropped the engineer onto his stool, turning to Jenson. Defiance was incapable of achieving Jenson's long-term goal—freedom—yet it might be useful in the short run.

"*Ahora*, Federico, where are we?"

"Nowhere."

"Nowhere? How come nowhere?"

"I'm not working unless you leave Wright alone."

El Buitre's eyes narrowed. Without moving his head, his eyes flicked from Jenson to Wright and back to Jenson.

"Your insides, too, Federico, can feed the coyotes."

El Buitre drew a long Bowie knife from under his sarape. Its blade gleamed in the faint light of the storeroom. Jenson shivered.

“Engineers are a dime a dozen,” persisted Jenson, noticing Wright scowl. “But physicists—”

“Twenty-five centavos a dozen,” said El Buitre, thumbing the cutting edge of his knife.

“Physicists who can build matter transmitters are one of a kind—namely, me.”

“You,” said El Buitre, snorting. “What do I care? I had no transmitter of material before you come. I have none now. I will lose nothing. I think I cut you up for fun.”

El Buitre started toward Jenson, grinning on the other side of the knife blade. Jenson was beginning to think defiance, whether for short- or long-run goals, was a mistake.

“Wait!” said Wright. “I’ll work.”

IV

THEY BEGAN WORK THE NEXT DAY. Jenson explained his plans and specifications to Wright, who in turn explained them to Juan, who told the men what to do. Jenson spent most of his time working on the heart of the transmitter, the energy converter and modulator. After the initial organization of the project, things went smoothly. At first, he was so busy getting the various aspects of construction under way that he had no time to plan an escape. Later, he forgot about escaping altogether, losing himself in his work for days. It was work that would have to be done anyway.

Wright worked on the projection ring. Using the bulldozer and a work gang, he excavated a hole seventy feet long and seventy feet deep, a trench with sloping sides, scooped from

the hillside. They leveled an area two hundred yards around the ring. Wright set up a mold for the concrete ring, building it in sections on the ground and paying scrupulous attention to detail. When the ring was complete, a half million dollars' worth of molten tantalum poured into section after section, it was as large as the foundation of a building.

One evening, shortly after the completion of the ring but before it was erected, Jenson and Wright were talking in the storeroom. Wright lounged on his cot, installed after he agreed to work. Jenson was putting the last touches on the day's entry in his step-by-step procedural journal. José, Juan's non-English-speaking brother, was reading a Spanish comic book near the door.

"What do you suppose the old buzzard is going to do with us," asked Wright, "when the transmitter's finished?"

"Shoot us, probably," answered Jenson without looking up.

"Cynic."

"Realist."

"Then why do you keep working?"

"To postpone the inevitable, I suppose."

"Nothing else?"

Jenson looked up from his notebook, laying his pen carefully in the centerfold. "What else?"

"You want to build it."

"Don't be silly."

"Who's silly? Think about it."

Jenson thought about it, resisting the idea. His only reason for building the transmitter was the threat of El Buitre's knife. That motive alone was potent enough. On several occasions he dreamed of being pursued through knee-deep snow by howling coyotes, a vulture flapping overhead. True,

sometime during the weeks of construction he became convinced they could succeed. True, the dreams stopped about the same time. But he worked because of the threat. Wright was wrong. Wright was definitely wrong. Whatever change Wright thought he noticed—if any—had nothing to do with his reason for working. It was compulsion—nothing more.

“You’re working for yourself,” said Wright.

“No.”

“Yes. I can see it.”

“I’m working for the same thing I’ve always worked for—our release.”

“You just said, Buzz is going to shoot us.”

“It was a joke.”

“Some joke.”

“Do you have a better explanation?”

“How long would it take you to get backers in the States?”

“I don’t know,” answered Jenson, uncomfortable at the implication of Wright’s question. “I haven’t thought about it.”

“How long? Any kind of backers—government or private. A year? Two years? Five years? Your transmitter’s brand new. A lot of people would have to be convinced before one speck of work was done.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Here, you’ve got the materials. Here, you’ve got the manpower. And most of all, here, you’ve got a willing patron—”

“That’s insane.”

“I agree.”

“You’re implying that I would take advantage of all the

people who died because of that . . . that . . . fanatic! I'm not responsible for that madman! Especially when he's got that Bowie knife at my throat!"

"I'm not suggesting you are."

"You're suggesting something. Whatever it is, you're wrong!"

"Am I? Here you are. You find yourself in the middle of this situation. A madman is forcing you at knife-point to do what you would have done anyway. He'll supply the material. He'll supply the manpower. You're not responsible, after all. Certainly, you're not responsible. All those people who died are already dead. And besides, everything you really want—want as much as El Buitre himself—is here." Wright grabbed at the air in front of him, clinching his fist. "Within your reach."

"I think we'd better end this discussion."

"Not yet," said Wright, leaning back on his cot. He propped his head up with his hands, looking at Jenson from between his elbows. "Let's talk about your patron."

"What about him?"

"We know—at least I know—why you want to build the transmitter."

"You're wrong there."

"Maybe, but why does *he* want it?"

"Why?"

"You heard me."

The question had never occurred to Jenson. The last ten years of his life were spent developing the transmitter. The last few months were spent building it. It seemed perfectly natural to him that everyone would want it.

"Why?" repeated Jenson. "I haven't the vaguest idea."

They erected the projection ring the next day, laying in the underground sections first. They built up from each stub of the underground “U,” completing the “O” when the last keystone section was lowered into place. It occurred to Jenson, watching the process, that the Pyramids were probably built in the same way, muscle over matter. Jenson was still building the transmitter itself, yet he felt satisfaction that its most impressive feature was finished. El Buitre kept the men working after dark, painting the awesome concrete arch with camouflage paint, blotchy patches of dark and light green to blend with the sprouting grass on the leveled area around it.

After dinner, Jenson left the storeroom door open so he could look at the arch. José, forced to work all day and guard all night, was slumped against the wall by the door, close to sleep. Wright was finishing his *frijoles*, noisily scooping spoonfuls from a metal pan.

“You must have *some* feeling of accomplishment, Harold,” said Jenson, gazing out the open door at the painters.

Wright grunted and spooned beans.

“The size of it alone—”

“I’ve built bigger,” said Wright through a mouthful of beans.

“What, for example?”

Wright swallowed the beans and smiled. “A mausoleum, for one.”

“For who?”

“Some other megalomaniac.” Wright dropped his spoon into the pan with a metallic click. “Is this thing of yours going to work?”

“I think so.”

“ ‘I think so’ isn’t going to be good enough for old Buzz.”

"I wish you'd quit calling him Buzz," said Jenson. "It annoys me."

"You like him!" said Wright, beaming, evidently delighted at his discovery. Wright himself annoyed Jenson as much as anything else about the project. Why the man insisted on analyzing Jenson's every statement for some hidden meaning was beyond Jenson.

"No."

"You do!"

"I respect—"

"You respect *him*?" Wright laughed, a deep, derisive laugh.

"His vision."

"Wait until he cuts your guts out and feeds them to the coyotes—then tell me how much you like his vision." Wright was silent a few moments. "You realize the sooner we get this thing built, the sooner we meet the coyotes."

"Will you shut up about coyotes!"

It's true," Wright insisted.

"Nonsense."

"Nonsense! It's good sense!" Wright pointed out the open door. "That bandit doesn't give a taco in hell for either one of us!"

"What do you suggest?"

"Drag your feet."

Jenson was incensed. Drag his feet! When he was so close? Out of the question! Jenson controlled himself, resolving to avoid provocative conversations with Wright. He was beginning to think El Buitre was more reasonable than Wright.

"Impossible," said Jenson.

"Why?"

"He would notice."

“By ‘he,’ I take it you mean Buzz—Mr. Vulture.”

“Yes.”

“That bird wouldn’t know a slowdown if he saw one.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“It’s already taken me twice as long to build that damn ring as it should have.”

Jenson was startled. His temper flared. His cheeks burned. What did Wright think he was doing with this . . . this . . .

“. . . sabotage!”

“Sure,” said Wright. “Why not?”

“Are you insane?”

“Nope. I’m the sanest man around here.”

“So say you,” said Jenson, yet his feelings were mixed. There was some elusive truth to what Wright said. On the other hand, anyone who would claim to be the sanest person around, must be nuts. The man was incapable of seeing the value of the completed transmitter.

“Unless,” said Wright.

“Unless what?”

“That thing really works.”

“It’ll work.”

“‘So say you,’ ” quoted Wright.

“Trust me.”

“Trust you!” Wright let out a sharp, monosyllabic whoop. Jenson was unable to interpret its meaning. Did Wright distrust his ability as a physicist? Or something else?

“Assume it will work. Then what?”

“We go out through it.”

Jenson’s antagonism melted. He smiled. He looked past Wright at the arch. Two men were finishing the last area of paint near the ground. It was perfect. He laughed, a long

laugh that seemed to drain all the hostility from him. It awoke José.

"Qué pasa?"

"Nada. Nada," answered Jenson, waving his hand for their guard to go back to sleep. José slumped against the wall, closing his eyes. Jenson looked back at Wright. "What better way to leave?"

"On foot," suggested Wright. "Or by car, if they hadn't sold yours. Even a balloon would be better, if we had a balloon. But we don't have much choice."

"None at all. Only the transmitter."

They worked out a simple plan. Jenson was to prepare the transmitter for a test run, focusing it a few hundred yards away. The coordinant program in the computer would be set up to switch to Tucson after a half hour of operation, giving them a chance to determine if the transmitter was safe to use on living creatures.

"Two living creatures," said Wright, making a "V" with his fingers. "When we're sure it's safe, we tell Buzz another test jump has to be made, and—poof! We're gone. It's simple."

Jenson shook his head in admiration. The most obvious solution to their situation had evaded him. It was the same problem he had with the original mathematics of the enlarged transmitter, the forest and the trees.

"Harold," said Jenson, reflecting on the plan. "You're brilliant."

"De nada," said Wright, finishing his beans.

A control shed had been built to house the equipment. The power supply gave Jenson the most trouble. Though he was a physicist, he had little experience with fusion reactors. It took

him several days just to figure out a method of reassembling it without overexposing the workmen to radiation. Doubts nagged him. When he started working on the Tucson program, the doubts got worse. Something was bothering him. It was difficult to pinpoint. Occasionally he found himself staring off across the hills, wondering what was troubling him. His brain told him the transmitter was finished. His intuition told him it needed work.

Jenson rechecked all the equipment, matching everything against his calculations. Everything was perfect. His malaise continued. The more he thought about it, the less he trusted his creation. He rechecked the calculations themselves. They were accurate to six decimal places. He could find nothing wrong, yet the feeling that something was out of control persisted.

His cheerfulness gave way to depression. He continued to work, rechecking what had already been rechecked. Grumpy, curt, he snapped at everyone except El Buitre, though he felt like snapping at him, too. Finally, one night when El Buitre stopped by the storeroom for a progress report, Jenson drew a line across the bottom of the last filled page in his notebook.

"Finished," said Jenson, flipping the pen onto the table.

"*Bueno*," said El Buitre, his tone more of long-expected satisfaction than enthusiasm. "We will make him work tomorrow."

"Who?"

"*Su aro magico*."

"It's not magic."

"It better be," interjected Wright.

"*Sí*. He had better be," agreed El Buitre, picking up

Jenson's notebook and weighing it in his hand. "I think I keep this notebook."

"Hey!"

"Hey, who?"

"Those are my notes!"

"Sí."

"How am I supposed to operate the transmitter without notes?"

El Buitre tapped his temple with his free hand. "Use the head. This is the insurance." He snapped the notebook closed, tucking it under his sarape. "If the book stays, the *físico* stays."

"But—"

"No buts!" El Buitre grinned, his missing tooth accenting the grin's ferocity, and left. They could hear him say "Watch them closely" in Spanish to someone outside. José entered and immediately fell asleep against the wall.

"Old Buzz is a real cagey bird, isn't he?" said Wright.

"Shut up!"

Jenson was bewildered. His notebook, his most important possession in the village—or anywhere, for that matter—was supposed to go with him through the transmitter. Agitated, he looked around the room. If only he had made a copy! His eyes fell on Wright.

"We can't go now."

"Why?"

"Why! Isn't it obvious?"

"No."

Jenson pointed toward the door. "*He's* got my notebook!

"So?"

“So we can’t go! It’s my lifework!”

“Take your pick, your life or your work.”

“Very glib, but it’s not *your* lifework!”

“You’re right. Just my life.” Wright was sitting on the edge of his cot with his hands clasped between his knees. He leaned forward, scrutinizing Jenson’s face. “Are we going?”

“I said no.”

“That’s what you said, all right. Are we going? It’ll probably be our only chance.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“What matters?”

“I don’t know,” said Jenson, avoiding Wright’s gaze.

“Does your life matter?”

“I don’t know. Yes, it matters. Stop it!”

“Your work?”

“Stop it! Why are you doing this?”

“My life matters, too,” said Wright. “At least to me. And it’s in your hands. I have to be able to trust you.”

Jenson looked at Wright. The man was unsure whether to trust him. The idea was incredible. Jenson wanted to escape as much as Wright. He also wanted to give his work to the world. He had set his goal years before. It was only now near success. Jenson remembered the years of work, fixing his attention on this distant goal. He remembered the years of sacrifice. Give it up? Leave without the notebook? The years would mean nothing. He would mean nothing. “You can trust me.”

“We’ll see,” said Wright. “Tomorrow.”

V

"SNAKE."

"Where?" said Jenson.

Jenson and Wright were standing on the mesa twenty feet from the arch. It towered above them, immense and triumphal. Jenson hugged himself, trying to keep out the morning cold. El Buitre was forming his men into a wide semicircle around the arch, some in red sarapes and others in *campesino* blouses and wool vests. Even two thousand men looked minuscule compared to the arch. Jenson had ticked off the last item on his check list and activated the transmitter five minutes earlier. The reactor, capable of powering a small city, bearly noticed the load. They had left the control shed and walked to the arch. Jenson squinted at the center of the arch. He could make out a faint, shimmering line, describing a twelve-foot circle in the air at the center of the arch, but not a snake.

"I don't see it."

Wright swept his arm through the air, tracing the line of the arch. "All that camouflage paint makes it look like a snake."

Jenson grunted. It still looked triumphal to him. El Buitre yelled several times, quieting his men. He walked over to Jenson.

"Where he come out?"

"Who?"

"What we put in."

"Oh, over there." Jenson pointed across the open area to a hill three hundred yards away, a hill touched with white by the first spring wild flowers. El Buitre glanced around and

waved a squad of men toward the hill. They trotted across the mesa, momentarily disappearing over its edge only to reappear climbing through the flowers. Halfway up the hill, they stopped.

“There?”

“About.”

El Buitre waved again and turned to Jenson. “We begin.”

Jenson looked around for something to feed through the transmitter. Anything would do. His eyes stopped at El Buitre.

“Your hat.”

“*Mi sombrero?*” said El Buitre, glancing up at its brim.

“Let me borrow it.”

“Oh, no!”

“For science.”

After some thought, El Buitre loosened the chin cord and pulled off the sombrero, grumbling about how El Buitre cared nothing for science. He handed it to Jenson. Before he let go, he squinted at Jenson. “Your machine, he had better work, *hombre*.”

“It’ll work,” said Jenson, imagining his own rigid body, riddled with bullet holes, being fed through the transmitter like a log through a pulverizer.

El Buitre snorted, letting go of the sombrero. Jenson walked to the bull’s-eye of the arch. The sound of low conversations and shuffling feet died when he stopped. They were watching him, waiting. He grasped the sombrero by its edge, testing it against the wind with a slight flick of his wrist. He hesitated, suddenly convinced the transmitter needed more work.

“What’s wrong!” yelled Wright.

“I—nothing!” yelled Jenson, adding softly to himself, “probably.”

"Well, throw the damn thing!"

Jenson threw it. The sombrero glided, spun, started to pitch, and vanished. A shout went up from the squad on the hill. They scrambled a few feet down the hillside and stooped. When they stood up, one of them waved a sombrero back and forth over his head, setting off cries of "*Ole*" and applause from the men around the arch. Jenson's doubts gave way to affection.

"You work."

It was the most incredible thing Jenson had ever seen in his life. He looked back at El Buitre and Wright.

"Hey!"

They ignored him, watching the man with the sombrero detach himself from the squad and run toward them, knee-deep in flowers.

"Hey, you guys! It works!"

The man with the sombrero sank below the edge of the mesa, then reappeared in stages, his head, waist, and finally his boots, running toward El Buitre. He stopped panting in front of El Buitre, who snapped the sombrero out of his hand and scrutinized it minutely. Jenson looked back at the arch, following its curve with his eyes.

"I can't leave you now."

"*Bueno*," said El Buitre behind him. "Federico!"

Reluctantly Jenson turned his attention to El Buitre, walking over to him.

"It works."

"*Si*."

Jenson was still dazed. "I can't believe it. It works."

"*Si*. We must try something bigger."

"Yes, bigger. It works."

"We got the message," interjected Wright.

"Un animal," said El Buitre.

When the idea registered, it pulled Jenson from his daze. An animal. It was too early for animals. There were tests, alterations, perfections to be done. What if they were successful? Wright would force him to go to Tucson. Tucson was out of the question. This was not time for a vacation. He must work, modify, perfect.

"It's too early for animals."

Wright scowled. Jenson avoided his eyes.

"Why?" said both Wright and El Buitre.

"Tests. We have to make tests. It has to be per—safe."

"Quien no se aventura," said El Buitre, *"no ha ventura."*

"This isn't the time for adventure."

El Buitre narrowed his eyes, pushing his face in front of Jenson's. "You want to keep El Buitre happy, do you not?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts. We do the animal."

Jenson gave up. If they failed, only a goat or dog or cat would be lost. If they succeeded—he could think of something.

"What kind of animal."

El Buitre grinned, his face still inches from Jenson's. *"Una rana."*

It took Jenson several seconds to remember that *rana* meant frog. Two men grabbed Wright.

"Hey!"

They dragged Wright, struggling between them, toward the projection surface.

"¡Pare!" shouted Jenson, confused. The men stopped, looking back. Wright continued to struggle. Jenson needed time to think.

"Why you stop them?"

"Why . . . ah . . . I," said Jenson, then saw a possible out.

"An inanimate object like a hat is one thing, but a man—"

"*Una rana*," corrected El Buitre, grinning.

"A man is something else."

"What?"

"Alive."

El Buitre grunted.

"The transmitter has to be perfectly stable. Let it warm up a few more minutes."

It was difficult to tell whether El Buitre believed him. Since the transmitter was entirely solid state, it was as "warm" as it would get. Jenson could do nothing to prevent Wright's being fed into the transmitter. His only hope was to convince El Buitre to postpone the test for ten minutes, allowing the coordinate program in the computer to shift to Tucson. Wright would have a chance—if slim—of escape. When Wright failed to materialize on the hillside, Jenson could say it proved his point. The transmitter needed more work to project life. El Buitre would never know the difference. Wright, one way or the other, would be in Tucson.

"How long?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes," answered Jenson, leaving room to bargain.

The bandit's eyes narrowed, his expression taking on a vicious look. Jenson shivered.

"Pepe!" shouted El Buitre.

José, their night guard and Juan's brother, broke from the men around the arch and ran up to El Buitre.

"*¡Sí, mi generalísimo.*"

“Talk to Federico about the little . . . *viaje*.”

José looked puzzled.

“José doesn’t speak—” began Jenson, but El Buitre’s expression cut him off. José’s face, round and somewhat more intelligent-looking than his brother’s, lit up. He looked at Jenson.

“How’s the weather in Tucson, Fred.”

Somewhere in the back of Jenson’s mind, a coyote howled. El Buitre flapped the back of his hand toward Wright’s guards, a scooting motion, telling them to proceed. “*¡Vamos, muchachos!*”

They pushed Wright to within a few feet of the projection surface. He looked back at Jenson, his face plaintive. Before Jenson could say anything reassuring, they shoved Wright under the arch, jumping back at the last second. Wright disappeared.

“Hop,” said El Buitre.

A cheer went up from the hillside, followed by another “Ole” from El Buitre’s men. A figure was tumbling through the wild flowers below the squad.

“Turncoat.”

“Harold.”

“Benedict Arnold.”

“Harold!”

“Quisling.”

“Is it *my* fault if *he*,” said Jenson, lingering on the word and hooking his thumb at José, who was sitting on a packing case, his legs dangling toward the floor of the storeroom, polishing a rifle in his lap, “speaks English?”

Wright, relaxing on his cot with one leg up and his hands behind his head, grunted, staring at the ceiling. A mariache

band was playing outside. Shouts and occasional thuds against the corrugated walls of the storeroom kept them awake. El Buitre had ordered a fiesta—*fiesta del aro magico*—to celebrate the success of the matter transmitter. The fiesta was two hours old.

"How was I supposed to know?" continued Jenson, reacting to Wright's accusatory silence. "He was a sleeper, a linguist in bandit's clothing, a charlatan! You can't hold me responsible! It was him!"

"He," corrected José. "I was just doing my job."

"Who asked you?"

"No one."

"Where did you learn English, anyway?"

"I learned some of it from you."

"Me!" said Jenson, momentarily forgetting Wright in the face of this new accusation.

"At Berkeley."

"You were one of my students?"

"Yep."

"I don't remember you."

"There were five hundred freshmen in the class."

Wright snorted. Jenson glared at him.

"That still doesn't mean I taught him English."

"I didn't say anything," said Wright. "You want another surprise."

"No."

"Ask him what he majored in."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just a hunch. Ask him."

"All right," said Jenson, turning to José. "What did you major in?"

"Physics."

Jenson felt a cold chill. With the transmitter complete, anyone could operate it. A physics major was more than qualified. They would still need Jenson to make repairs.

"B.A.?" asked Jenson, hopefully.

"Masters."

Jenson, suddenly expendable, cleared his throat. Wright interrupted before he could continue.

"I wasn't talking about José, anyway. I was talking about you, you and that lame excuse about it being too early for animals."

"It was."

"You didn't think so when you set the program for Tucson."

"That was different."

"How?"

"It just was," answered Jenson, annoyed. Wright was starting his amateur psychoanalysis again. It served no purpose. Jenson concerned himself with reality and the outside world. So fleeting a phenomenon as human motives—especially his own—had little place in it. He had his work. He did it. What else was there?

"I'll tell you what the difference is."

"Please don't."

"It worked."

Jenson controlled himself. Wright was treading on thin ice.

"It worked and you couldn't leave it."

"You're wrong there. If it hadn't been for this . . . spy, you, at least, would be in Tucson."

"Chance."

"What?"

"You made up your mind when there was no other alternative."

"He's right," said José.

"Who asked you?" shouted Jenson. "Who the hell asked you anything at all? What are *you* doing here anyway? A man with your background, working for that . . . that . . .

"Lunatic," supplied Wright.

"He's not a lunatic," said José, quietly. "He's a visionary."

Wright whooped and sat up on the cot.

"He is!" insisted José.

"I'm surrounded by lunatics," said Wright. "Buzz, Jenson and now, *you!*"

"I frankly don't give a damn what you think," said José. "Mexico needs him."

"And I need a hole in the head."

"You may get one," said José, polishing his rifle.

Jenson balked. The conversation was going sour. Wright, undeterred, swung his legs around and sat on the edge of the cot.

"How can you justify carving his vision out of human flesh, most of it Mexican flesh?"

"Necessity."

"I hear the echo . . ."

"I don't," said Jenson, looking around. All Jenson heard was the mariache band.

". . . of history. Every butcher for two thousand years has justified murder, rape and every atrocity under the sun by running up the flag of 'necessity.' Richard the Lionhearted once cut the intestines out of every Moslem he could find in Jerusalem and strung them end to end in the streets. It was 'necessary' to get at the gold they were supposed to have swallowed, and The Cause needed gold."

"Did he get it?"

"No."

“Some guys have hard luck,” said José.

“What about your own life?” said Wright. “Since you don’t seem to care about anyone else’.”

“Me?”

“What if you get killed?”

“I don’t matter.”

“Fanatics!” said Wright, disgust encrusting the word. “They’re all alike.”

The door next to José burst open, splashing the last of the day’s sunlight on the wooden floor. El Buitre, his sombrero dangling down his shirt front, swayed in the doorway, a thin-necked wine bottle in his left hand. He grinned, shoving the sombrero over his shoulder with his free hand.

“*Señores*,” said El Buitre and staggered forward. Cool air followed him into the storeroom. “It is so nice that you have come to my fiesta. *Muy buenas noches*.” He bowed deeply at the waist, passing the wine bottle under his stomach. The sombrero slipped from his back and dangled toward the floor.

“How’s it going, Buzz,” said Wright.

“Buzz? What is that buzz?” said El Buitre. “The buzz saw, buzzzzzzzzzz.”

Jenson shivered. Drunk, El Buitre was more unpredictable than usual. Wright was pushing him too far, especially since Jenson was now expendable.

El Buitre, the wine bottle still in his hand, flapped his arms, sloshing wine out of the bottle. “I am no buzz saw.” He walked around in a circle, flapping his arms. “I am the vool-ture, the fear-some vool-ture!” He stopped in front of Wright. “What is this buzz?”

“Buzzard,” said José. “It’s a kind of vulture.”

El Buitre glanced around at José, snarling. "Who ask you?"
"Sorry."

The bandit gave José a lingering stare before he turned back to Wright. "Now, what is this buzz?"

Wright nodded toward José. "Like he said, it's for buzzard. It's an affectionate name for a vulture."

"Affectionate? The gringos like the vultures so much?"

"Some do," said Wright, glancing at Jenson.

José burst out laughing.

"*iCalla la boca, hombre!*" yelled El Buitre, lowering his arms.

José was silent. Jenson was terrified.

"Do you like the vool-tures, engin'er?"

"I can take them or leave them."

El Buitre belched and swayed, looking around the storeroom. He stroked his mustachios, thinking. He looked at Jenson, his expression pensive, then returned to Wright.

"What one is the most fear-some to the gringo ear?" asked El Buitre, pulling on his earlobe. "Vool-ture or buzz?"

"Buzz, I think. Vulture sounds too Latin."

"You joke?"

"No," answered Wright. Jenson cringed.

"You just say that buzz affectionate."

"It's fearsome, too."

El Buitre looked directly at Jenson. "You agree, Federico?" Jenson, unable to speak, much less disagree, nodded up and down. The bandit raised his wine bottle to his lips. Wine gurgled from the bottle. He lifted it higher and higher, his chin extended and his Adam's apple working. Wine trickled

from the corners of his mouth, running down his brown neck. When the bottle was empty, he threw it over his shoulder. It shattered on a packing case near José. He glowered, the expression Jenson had dreaded, and began working at the flap on his holster, cursing its obstinacy. Finally, after starting over several times, he got the holster open and extracted his .45. He fired into the recesses of the storeroom, shrieking "El Buzz!" and squeezing off round after round. In the small storeroom, the explosions were deafening. Lead ripped through sheet metal and ricocheted around packing crates, occasionally thudding into them. Someone outside screamed. El Buitre kept firing. Jenson got down on his hands and knees, crawling under the table. He could see El Buitre's boots walking in a circle, hear his screeches, and feel his teeth vibrate with every round. Suddenly the firing stopped. El Buitre peered under the table.

"Federico?"

"No!" said Jenson, remembering he was expendable.

"What you do there?"

"No!"

"No, what?"

Jenson looked up at the bandit, still covering his ears with his hands. "No, please?"

"No, no. I mean why you say 'no'?"

"Don't shoot."

"I am out of bullets."

"Don't reload."

"Federico—"

"Don't—"

"Federico."

"What?"

"Tomorrow set the transmitter for *Ciudad de Mexico*."

"Mexico City?" said Jenson, removing his hands from his ears. There would be a tomorrow.

"Si," said El Buitre quietly. "El Buzz is going to visit *la capital*!" The bandit glanced at his .45. Jenson looked at it, too, noting the size of the rest of the gun. The action was still closed. "I still have the bullet."

"No," said Jenson.

El Buitre stood up, fired through the ceiling, and left, slamming the door behind him.

Jenson crawled out from under the table. The air smelled of cordite. He was thankful it smelled at all. Wright and José were still on the cot and the crate. Wright, looking at José, nodded toward the door.

"Some visionary."

José was silent.

VI

WHEN JENSON RECOVERED from what he still considered his brush with death, he and Wright were separated to prevent any escape plan. Jenson got the storeroom. Wright got a tent with three guards. Jenson was content to be alone. The day had exhausted him. The pinnacle of success followed by a glance into the abyss—it was too much for one day. Anyway, the Freud of the Sierra Madre was annoying—even dangerous—to have around. He antagonized the wrong people, El Buitre among them.

"When you're through with those Mexico City calculations," said José, stoic on his packing case, "I'm supposed to look them over."

"Doesn't *anyone* trust me?"

"El Buitre just doesn't want any Tucson detours."

Jenson moved from the table to his cot, propping his head up with a pillow. It was his first opportunity to reflect on the transmitter's success.

"José," said Jenson, looking at the ceiling. "Do you realize what this is going to mean?"

"What?"

"What we're doing here. It's a revolution."

"That's the general idea."

"In the next fifty years—no, twenty years," continued Jenson, noticing a star through the hole in the ceiling, "the world can be a garden. It's possible to take one continent—say Australia—and set it aside for industry. The rest of the world can be a playground. Anyone who works in Australia can live anywhere he wants, step through an arch like ours in the morning and step back home at night."

"What about the Australians?"

"All right, we'll use the Sahara Desert, or even better, the Moon." Jenson imagined the Moon, covered with industry and arches. "It will be the greatest single uniting force in the history of man."

"Could be."

"*Could* be," said Jenson, warming to his subject. "It *will* be. A rational, worldwide civilization is within our reach."

"Men aren't always rational."

"You sound like Wright."

"Dynamite, if you remember, was supposed to make war impossible. Nuclear energy can power a city or flatten it."

"So?"

"So the question's never what's invented, but how it's used. And as far as worldwide civilization, there's that old stumbling block, sovereignty. Nations will never relinquish their

precious sovereignty." José paused, thinking over what he had just said, then added, "voluntarily."

"Politics."

"That's right."

Jenson never particularly cared for politics. Democrats or Republicans, revolutionaries or reactionaries—they were all the same to him. International politics was even more childish, armed squabbles over ephemeral values. Physics was more reliable. Political caprice could never replace the reality of physics. He trusted physics. It would always be there.

"Politics is none of my business."

"Indifference is a political position."

"So they say," said Jenson, deciding to change the subject. "Incidentally, why does El Buitre want to go to Mexico City?"

"You aren't *that* naive," said José, laughing. He nodded toward the rifle lying across his lap.

"I thought—" began Jenson, but his imagination brought him up short. He imagined two thousand men materializing in Mexico City, sweeping everything before them. He imagined the horde swelling, becoming a national army, an international army. If El Buitre could take Mexico City, he could take Washington, London, Paris, Moscow, Peking, or Lubumbashi! Everything and everyone were potentially within his reach. It was staggering! Nothing was safe! Governments, centuries-old institutions, civilization itself could fall before El Buitre's horde, riding out of nowhere and seizing everything!

"You thought what?"

"I thought the killing was over."

That night Jenson dreamed of raids, dreams tinged in the red of fire and blood. Moscow, Rome, Atlanta—all burned again in his dreams. Congress, Parliament and the Kremlin exploded under cannon shot, fired into the matter transmitter in Mexico. The faces of screaming women and children swam through his mind, flailing their arms. Miles of refugees, hopelessly trying to escape the inescapable, tramped through his brain. Barbarism raged from ear to ear. In the night sky of his mind, constellations rearranged themselves, spelling out “MEXICO NEEDS HIM!” “MEXICO” was crossed out and “THE WORLD” added. Jenson himself, a figure naked in driving rain, fled four horsemen, their horses snorting fire. Hooves, clapping thunder, trampled him under foot, yet miraculously he survived to find himself roasting on a spit with an apple in his mouth, turning faster and faster, El Buitre’s laughing face flashing past with each revolution of the spit. He awoke in a cold sweat.

The storeroom was silent. José, visible in the dim light only as a rifle across a lap, watched him.

“What time is it?”

“Four.”

“I was dreaming.”

“I figured.”

“Horrible things.”

José was silent.

“Get me a light.”

Jenson blinked against the flaring match. José, tilting back the lantern chimney, lit the mantle. Hissing, the lantern caught, flooding the center of the room with a shivering circle of light. Jenson got out of bed and dressed. Sleep, with the four horsemen waiting, was impossible. He started on the Mexico City program.

The more Jenson worked, the more he felt driven to work. When he paused for a moment to mull over some calculations, his dreams impinged, as vivid in his mind as an event in life. Jenson had always trusted his unconscious mind. It solved problems for him. When he was stymied in his research work, he would pack his mind full of data and turn his attention to something else. Usually the answer would come to him, full-blown and correct. The same thing was happening now. He could feel something within himself, forcing its way to the surface. He continued working.

By mid-morning, after Juan relieved José, he was almost finished, yet the memory of his dreams and their unsettling feeling continued. He was working on the altitude parameter of the coordinate program. He glanced over the calculations, automatically rechecking the figures. There was an error, the first he had noticed that morning. Mexico City, according to the detailed maps supplied by José, was 7,348 feet above sea level. It was 1,182.5168 miles from the projection surface to the point where El Buitre wanted to materialize. At that distance, an error of .00015 percent in his calculations meant an error of 30 feet in Mexico City.

"Thirty feet," said Jenson. He stared into one corner of the storeroom, reflecting on the error. For the first time that morning, he felt relaxed. No dreams impinged.

"*Qué tiene ud., Señor Jenson?*"

"Nothing, Juan. Just a thought."

Jenson finished the program at noon.

At four o'clock, José came to check the figures. Jenson hovered behind him, peering over his shoulder and explaining anything difficult.

"What's this?" asked José, pointing at a series of equations and their equivalents in real numbers. Jenson tensed.

“What?”

“This. What’s seven and four?”

“Eleven.”

“You’re sure about that.”

“Yes, why?”

“You’ve got twelve here.”

“Oh,” said Jenson, relaxing. Mathematics was Jenson’s forte, not arithmetic. He quickly corrected the arithmetic. José finished his checking and tapped his pencil point on the table.

“No detours, at least.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure,” said José. “Somehow it just doesn’t feel right.”

“That’s you, not the program,” said Jenson. “Remember, it’s been a few years since you did this kind of work.”

“I suppose so.”

José gathered the papers and stuffed them into Jenson’s briefcase, snapping it shut.

“That’s that,” said José, standing up.

“Where are you going?”

“Out. You’ll be alone tonight, but don’t get any ideas. You’d never make it.”

José left, locking the storeroom door behind him. Jenson looked at the closed door, imagining escape followed by his body in a shallow grave, a hand protruding through the loose soil like a lily. He lay down on his cot, planning to think things through. Instead, he fell into a deep sleep, uninterrupted by dreams.

Somewhere in the distance a bird screeched. Jenson listened. Another screeched. He opened his eyes. Something

scraped and banged on the corrugated iron of the door. A nail, being drawn from wood, squeaked. The bird image faded. Jenson sat up. After a loud *twang*, the storeroom door came open.

"Come on."

It was Wright.

"But—"

"No buts."

Wright's clothes were ripped and an ugly-looking gash trickled blood down his forehead. Whatever means Wright used to escape, the ferocity of the encounter had left evidence.

"How—"

"No hows either," said Wright, leveling an M-16 at Jenson. "They're all down by the transmitter. We've got about ten minutes before the two women I jumped recover."

"Women?" said Jenson. "Women did that?"

"Everyone else is getting ready for the raid."

"But the computer isn't—" began Jenson, then broke off, remembering José. "Where are we going?"

"Just follow me."

They left the storeroom. Jenson, crouching, followed Wright around the corner of the building. It took Jenson several minutes to realize they were making a wide circle around the camp. He pulled Wright's tattered sleeve.

"We're going the wrong way," whispered Jenson, pointing back the way they had come.

"Get down," said Wright, dropping into the tall grass on the hillside. Jenson looked around. He could make out the tips of several red sombreros, bobbing up and down near the crest of the hill. He got down next to Wright.

"Where are we?"

"In the gully below the transmitter."

"Are you nuts?" whispered Jenson. "One sight of us and we're both dead. We're expendable nowadays, you know."

"I know."

"So let's get out of here."

Jenson started to squirm around in the grass, preparing to retrace their path. Wright grabbed his elbow.

"This is the only way. If we try to make it on foot, they'll just send men after us. We have to get as far from here as possible and as fast as possible. In the confusion at the other end—"

"The other end. You're not going through the transmitter."

"As a matter of fact, *we're* going through the transmitter."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

"We can't."

"Listen, Jenson. I've had about enough of you. You may not want to leave your creation up there, but I sure as hell do. And you—whether you like it or not—are coming with me. You're a national resource."

"You've got me all wrong—"

"I've got you dead right. Now keep quiet."

Wright brought the muzzle of the rifle to bear close to Jenson's face.

"You wouldn't shoot a national resource."

"Only if it's a choice between it and me. Now, shut up."

Though Jenson was pleased to see the sanest man around close to irrationality, he was silently pleased. Wright, for some reason entirely beyond Jenson, was determined to beat El Buitre to the transmitter. Resistance, at this point, would be futile.

"Why don't you go after they do?"

"It may shut off."

"It won't," whispered Jenson. "I know that equipment backwards and forwards."

"Do you know it since José's been working on it?"

"No."

Wright started to crawl around the base of the hill. Jenson followed. They arrived at a point Jenson estimated was beside the arch, and started toward the crest.

From over the hill, Jenson heard El Buitre's voice.

"¡Muchachos!"

There was a mechanical sputter. An engine caught and shrieked, the high shriek of a two-stroke engine. Jenson, crawling with a frog-leg movement, worked his way to the crest of the hill next to Wright, peering over. He could see the edge of the arch. It looked more like a camouflaged monument from their angle. A wooden ramp had been set up in front of the arch. Jenson looked at El Buitre's men.

"Somehow," whispered Jenson. "I pictured horses."

"Not Buzz. He's mechanized."

Row after row of El Buitre's men, three abreast, each dressed in bright red sarapes and sombreros, with rifles slung across their backs, were kick-starting red Hondas. Suddenly, other engines caught. And earsplitting roar blasted across the mesa. Exhaust billowed in a gray cloud over the men astride their machines. The line of men or motorcycles stretched over the other edge of the mesa and out of sight, a Chinese dragon of men and machines. El Buitre, the dragon's head, twisted the accelerator of his Honda, the only white motorcycle in the pack. It was inaudible in the din of engines. He waved his arm in a sweeping "Follow me" motion.

“Now!” yelled Wright, jumping up and sprinting toward the arch with his rifle in both hands.

“No!” shouted Jenson. His cry was drowned in the noise of engines. Jenson scrambled onto the mesa after Wright. Legs and arms pumping, he pursued. Wright was fast, but short. The rifle, throwing him slightly off balance, slowed Wright. Jenson gained on him.

In the corner of his eye, Jenson could see El Buitre. The bandit saw them and grinned. The white Honda hopped, a momentary wheelstand before it settled to the dirt. El Buitre, hunched over the handlebars, elbows up, was heading straight for them, his mustachios pressed against his cheeks. Momentarily, superimposed on El Buitre and the first rank of riders, Jenson saw four horsemen. He drove for Wright’s heels, felt contact and grabbed the ankles. They fell, skidding to a stop ten feet from the ramp.

An instant after the fall, El Buitre’s front wheel hit the ramp, its spokes invisible with motion. His white Honda hopped and he melted into the bull’s eye. Red sarapes flapping, the first rank of riders hit the ramp. Jenson and Wright were enveloped in dust and noise. Only the noise and dust and his grip on Wright’s ankles were reality, produced by rank after rank of riders taking the ramp. The world was dust and noise. Jenson could hardly breathe. He lay prostrate, his cheek to the ground and arms extended, struggling to stay conscious and hang on to Wright.

Finally, when Jenson was near blacking out, the noise diminished, then faded rapidly. He heard a last thud on the ramp, the roar of engines when the rear wheels were freed from traction, and silence, complete and total. After a few moments, his ears began to ring. He opened his eyes. The

dust thinned, broke in patches, then blew away entirely. Jenson inhaled deeply, tasting the dirt in his mouth. Wright, prone in front of him, was covered from head to toe with an even coat of powdered dust. Wright looked back along his body, moving his lips.

"What?" yelled Jenson, still deaf from the vanished motorcycles.

Wright moved a dusty object around, pointing it at Jenson. After several seconds, Jenson recognized it as the M-16. Wright mouthed the words "Let go."

Jenson let go. They stood up. Jenson's ear began to clear. He spat once, turning the dust on his lips to mud. He began slapping his clothes, raising a small dust cloud around himself.

Wright leveled the rifle at Jenson.

"After you."

Jenson stopped slapping himself. "Listen to me."

"Let's go, Jenson."

Wright swung the muzzle of the rifle toward the arch, indicating Jenson was to go first.

"Please! Listen!"

"What is it?"

"I made a mistake."

"Mistake?"

"In the program."

"What kind of mistake?"

"If I'm right, they just materialized thirty feet off the ground."

"Thirty—" said Wright, his expression, under the dirt, stunned. "When did you figure this out?"

"Yesterday. I left it in the program."

Slowly, Wright lowered the rifle. A broad grin surfaced on his face. His teeth were mottled with dirt. "But that's sabotage, Fred."

"Why not," said Jenson. "We can get a truck at the village."

They started toward the village. At the edge of the mesa, Wright stopped, looking at Jenson. Except for Wright's eyes, glistening through the dirt, his face looked mummified.

"I think I owe you an apology."

"What for?" asked Jenson.

"I thought—" Wright shook his head from side to side, finding either the apology or the reason it was necessary difficult to express.

"You thought what?"

"I thought you were as much a fanatic as the rest of them."

"Forget it," said Jenson, glancing back at the arch. It was a lifeless structure of concrete and metal, nothing more. "I almost was a fanatic."

Cynthia

—FIRST TRIP TO EARTH?

Startled by the interruption, the Guest turned Garraty's head from side to side, glancing over each shoulder at the empty subway car.

“Hello?”

—Hi.

“Where are you?”

—*Same place you are.*

Garraty usually occupied himself with his own thoughts during a transfer, allowing a Guest to go about his business undistracted. Today, he felt talkative. His long planned vacation to the Sierras, due after two more transfers, buoyed him. He could already feel the delicate flick of his wrist, redirecting a fly in mid-cast, the strike, the tug and the fight of a steelhead trout on the line. Fishing integrated a man, mind and muscle working together. If every Host in the Los Angeles section took up fishing, Garraty would guarantee a reduction in the number of crack-ups before retirement. Fishing saved Garraty from going sour more than once.

—*You like fishing?* asked Garraty.

“Fishing?”

—*Catching fish. Rod and line and hook. Here, fish. That sort of thing.*

“Who are you?”

—*Mike Garraty. Your Host.*

The Guest, pausing to think, scratched Garraty's head, a

habit Garraty himself never picked up. Once in a while, a Guest's habit lingered. Motor skills and strong emotions, stimulants to physiological change, left residual traces. Garraty remembered enjoying the feel of a piano keyboard after a concert pianist visited Earth. He tried playing and succeeded, plinking out "Chop Sticks." On another occasion, hosting an eminent attorney—on Earth to argue the fate of a planet before the United Nations High Court—Garraty felt indignation for weeks after the case was heard, snapping self-righteously at his friends and condemning their apathy. He remembered pounding tables. A week fishing reestablished Garraty's placid world view. Other Hosts reported similar experiences. Transfer, Inc. kept a psychiatrist on twenty-four hour call. Garraty preferred fishing to Freud.

The silence continued, accompanied by tension in Garraty's muscles, a condition Garraty sensed only at a distance.

—*Relax, said Garraty. You'll wear this old carcass out.*

"Old?"

—*Just a figure of speech. Let's get back to fishing. I remember once on the Klamath, a friend of mine and I—Willie Hanson, a short guy—You do like fishing?*

The Guest, busy testing Garraty's arms, tugging at the crossbar on the seat in front of them, ignored him.

—*You're still in control.*

The Guest stopped tugging on the bar. "You've been there all the time?"

—*Sure.*

"Are they all . . . that way?"

—*What way?*

The Guest groped for the word. "Inhabited."

The word amused Garraty. As far as he was concerned,

Davis or Davies (Garraty had missed the name) was doing the inhabiting.

—*You don't want a dead body, do you?*

“No.”

—*Then they're 'inhabited,' as you put it.*

The man's anxiety increased. Garraty's Guest seemed old. During the day, visiting several banks and negotiating a business loan for mineral extraction on a planet called Geros, apparently a world with no land masses and a water pressure four times that of Earth, Garraty noticed nothing extraordinary. Davis, or Davies, or whoever he was, comported himself like any business Guest, but the discovery of someone conscious in the borrowed body unnerved him. Young men adjusted quickly, glad for the company and occasionally asking advice. Garraty, himself a young man, never gave advice. Older men, discovering their conscious companion, seldom wanted company or advice, usually preferring to conduct their business and go home. Old men felt threatened.

The car rolled into the Century City station, platform lights flashing squares of light across the seats and car floor. The doors split, hissing into the sidepanels. Two men got on, walking to the rear of the car and sitting down. The doors closed and the train lurched, leaving the station.

“They should tell people,” said Garraty's Guest.

—*They usually do. Can I make a suggestion?*

After several moments of hesitation, the Guest answered. “All right.”

—*Don't vocalize.*

“What?”

—*Think what you have to say. If you vocalize, people will think you're talking to yourself.*

The Guest paused, thinking over the suggestion and its implications.

—You can read my mind.

—*Can you read mine?*

—No.

Garraty laughed.

—*The answer, said Garraty, is yes and no. When I verbalize, you're reading my mind.*

The car rolled through several more stations, stopping for passengers at each. Garraty was deciding how to bring up the subject of fishing, when his Guest broke in. For some reason, it reminded Garraty of a young boy he had once hosted, visiting relatives on Earth. Whenever the boy wanted to talk to Garraty, he broke in with "Pilot to navigator."

—May I ask a question?

—*Sure.*

—Why don't our personalities merge?

—*Personality has a certain integrity to it. Dual personalities don't merge either.*

The explanation seemed to satisfy his Guest, who remained silent for several more stops. When the car rolled into the Sepulveda Boulevard station the Guest stood up, preparing to leave the car.

They exited, catching a moving belt through a brightly lit tile tunnel. Garraty's Guest stood on the belt, letting it pull him.

—*If you walk with the belt, it's faster.*

—Oh, I'd forgotten.

At the end of the belt the Guest climbed the escalator, taking the steps two at a time. Garraty smiled to himself. The more highly altered a Guest's natural body, the more he

delighted in an Earth body. Garraty kept himself in condition to avoid any possibility of enthusiasm outrunning ability.

They emerged in the ticket section of Los Angeles Interstellar, a cavernous building with roofs as high as a shuttle hanger. Transfer, Inc., unfortunately for Garraty's frequent stock options, made few encroachments into commercial space travel. Transfer's clients, incapable of travel aboard ordinary spacecraft, constituted a separate market. United Nations policy on planetary settlement required a planet to remain roughly as it was found. If a world was habitable by normal human standards, it quickly populated. If it required substantial alteration to accommodate human beings, the human beings were altered instead of the planet. The policy was said to promote lasting human colonization. Instead of a planet being stripped of its valuables and abandoned—a frequent occurrence in the early days of space exploration—the population remained, matched to their world. The development of transfer allowed efficient, short-term travel from these colonized worlds.

Garraty's Guest approached a ticket counter, a transparent plastic desk enclosing several young girls. A tall blonde with a nametag reading "Louise" detached herself from the group and came over to them.

"May I help you?"

"I'd like to book first class passage for two from here to Hector in Alpha Centauri," said the Guest, depositing his passport on the counter.

Garraty, paying more attention to the blonde than the transaction, started at the sight of the passport. Transfer Guests never carried passports. The picture, voiceprint and genetic identification of someone else's body were of little use.

—*Where'd you get that?* asked Garraty.

No one answered. The girl inserted the passport endflap in a slot on the desk and asked the Guest to put his hand on a metal grill.

“When would you like to leave?”

“Tonight, if possible.”

The girl said something to the computer input. It answered immediately, clearing a “Mr. Andrian” for the 2300 ship to Alpha Centauri.

—*Who's Andrian?*

The girl finished writing up the tickets, slipping them into a folder and handing them to the Guest along with his passport.

“You’ll have to be here by twenty-one hundred to clear your companion. I hope you have a pleasant trip.”

“Thank you.”

—*What are you trying to pull Davis?*

They started toward the subway escalator.

—Have you ever been to Hector, Mr. Garraty?

—*No.*

—It’s lovely.

Garraty tried again to talk to the man, without success. They walked down the moving escalator and along the belt to the subway, pausing to insert a credit card in the turnstile. Passengers filled the car, forcing them to stand. The more Garraty thought about his Guest’s activities, the more they bothered him. Davies had given the girl a passport. She slipped the endflap into their computer and took a genetic reading off Garraty’s hand. The computer cleared the reservations, indicating that picture, voiceprint and genetic I.D. matched the information on the passport, Mr. Andrian’s passport.

They changed trains in Long Branch, picking up the South Coast monorail. The coastal cities of Orange County slid past, Seal, Sunset and Huntington Beaches identical below them. When they neared the Balboa Island station, the Guest stood up.

—*Where are we going?*

They walked down the escalator and crossed a short bridge to the island, stopping to glance in the water.

—*I hope you're not planning to jump*, said Garraty.

—No. The water looks different.

—*Looks the same to me.*

—It's different than I remembered.

—*It's just as wet.*

On the narrow main street of the island, blocked off to all but foot traffic, they stopped at a public phone. Garraty's Guest carefully read the posted instructions before punching out a number. A child answered, her face round and tan on the screen.

"Hello."

"Hello. Is your mother there?"

"No."

The girl waited for the next question, stoic on the screen.

"Is anyone there?"

"Me."

Garraty smiled. Whoever his Guest wanted, a small, literal-minded obstacle stood in the way.

"Are there any adults there?"

"No."

"You're alone."

"No."

—*Having problems?*

"You are the only one there?"

“Except for gran’ma.”

“May I speak to her?”

“No.”

Two hands reached into the field of view, hoisting the girl out of her chair. The camera adjusted upward, stopping on a grey-haired woman with the child in her arms.

“May I help you?”

“I hope so,” said the Guest. “I’m looking for a Mrs. Stewart.”

“I’m Mrs. Stewart.”

Garraty sensed confusion from his Guest. Reacting immediately, Garraty stabilized himself. Though normal sense data—sight, sound, smell and touch—came to him second hand, a Guest’s strong emotions required protection. Crackups usually happened because of a Host who kept inadequate distance between himself and his Guest.

“Cynthia Stewart?” asked the Guest.

“Yes.”

The confusion increased. Two words spilled over the threshold to Garraty—*so old*.

After a few moments, the feelings subsided. Garraty relaxed.

“I have to see you,” said the Guest.

“Do you mind if I ask who you are?” inquired the woman.

“Who is he, gran’ma?”

“I don’t know, dear. That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

“I can’t talk on the phone.”

“Then I’m sorry, young man—” She reached toward the screen, preparing to hang up. Garraty sensed desperation.

“Wait, please. It’s about Ted.”

“Ted,” said the woman.

"Ted McCann."

—*Who's McCann.*

The woman's expression changed, losing its impersonal quality. "Ted McCann."

"Yes."

"You're a relative of his."

"Something like that."

—*Who's McCann?*

"All right, young man. But give me a few minutes to straighten up the house."

"Fine. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said the little girl, waving.

The Guest hung up.

—*Who's McCann?*

—Quiet. I'm thinking.

—*Listen, Davies-Davis-Andrian—*

—McCann.

—*Whatever you call yourself, there's something fishy going on here and I—*

—I thought you liked fishing.

—*Very funny. I want to know what we're doing.*

—I think we'll have a cup of coffee and let Cynthia clean up. I haven't tasted coffee in fifty years.

McCann found a sidewalk cafe at the end of the street. Selecting a table near the pedestrian traffic, he ordered coffee, "strong and black." Morning shoppers passed on the sidewalk next to them. McCann took evident delight in the coffee, sipping it gingerly.

"Hot . . ."

—*Don't burn the lips.*

" . . . but good."

—*I'm glad you like it*, said Garraty, disgusted. After this transfer, Garraty personally would make sure McCann never transferred again. Phony names, phony passports, phony everything.

Among the passersby, Garraty noticed Gary Westcott, his red hair and freckled face unmistakable in the crowd. Westcott, a Host in the Orange County section of Transfer, almost passed without recognizing Garraty.

“Mike?”

McCann gave no response, staring blankly at Westcott. Westcott's face took on a more formal air.

“Excuse me, Sir.”

“Yes.”

“My name is Westcott. I'm with Transfer, Inc.”

Garraty felt McCann grow tense.

“What can I do for you?”

“The Host you're using is named Mike Garraty. I wonder if I could ask you to pass along his answer to a question.”

“Certainly.”

Westcott's face became animated, as if he were trying to communicate with someone at the bottom of a well and thought exaggerated expressions would help. It occurred to Garraty that Westcott must keep a greater distance between himself and his Guests than did Garraty.

“Mike, I made reservations at Moosehorn Lodge for the twenty-second. They've got steelhead two feet long!” said Westcott, holding his hands two feet apart. “Do you still want to go?”

—How come he can talk? asked McCann.

—*He's off duty. Tell him, yes, I still want to go.*

“He says he can't make it the twenty-second.”

—*Hey! Tell him I can make it!*

“Why not?” asked Westcott.

“He says he’ll be out of town. Something about a girl.”

Westcott smiled. “A big one on the line. Thank you, Sir. I hope you enjoy your stay on Earth.”

Westcott left, disappearing into the crowd.

—*Listen, whatever your name is . . .*

—McCann.

—*. . . I’ve been planning that trip for a month!*

—You’ll be out of town.

Garraty tried to pursue the subject. McCann, mute, finished his coffee, paying and starting down the street. After a block, McCann picked up the pace, inhaling deeply.

—A fine sea breeze, said McCann.

—*Wonderful.*

They reached a three-story residence, fronting on the channel, a late twentieth-century structure, remodeled to accept modern conveniences. McCann went up to the front door, rapping on it with Garraty’s knuckles.

—*No one home,* said Garraty, hopeful.

The woman answered with the child in tow.

“There he is, gran’ma.”

“Yes, dear, I see him. Won’t you come in.”

They went into the livingroom, a wide comfortable room with a view of the channel through one transparent wall. Two sloops, stripped spinakers puffed, were running down the channel.

McCann sat on a low couch near the picture wall, leaning forward and resting Garraty’s forearms on his knees. The woman sat in an easy-chair opposite them, lifting the child into her lap. Once settled, she looked up at McCann, her

expression courteous and expectant.

“You said you had word from Ted McCann.”

“I do.”

“I haven’t heard from him in—let me see.” She gazed past them at the channel outside, searching her memory to count the years. Finally she smiled and gave up. “Too long to remember.”

“Fifty years.”

“You’re a relative of his?”

“This is very difficult. Cynthia.”

“Difficult?” She ignored the use of her first name.

“This,” said McCann, indicating Garraty’s body by opening out his arms as if displaying a new suit, “is the result of a transfer.”

“Ahh,” said Mrs. Stewart, following it immediately with a longer “Ahhh,” as fuller understanding came to her. “Who is he, gran’ma?”

“I think he’s someone I knew a long time ago, dear.” She looked up at McCann. “Is that right?”

“Yes.”

She inspected McCann as if she, too, were appreciating his new suit. The process annoyed Garraty. “It even looks a little like you.”

“I know.”

—*What’s all this it business?*

Momentarily, the conversation died.

—What do you say after fifty years, Garraty?

—*You got me.*

Mrs. Stewart shifted slightly in her chair, repositioning the child. Garraty could hear the rustle of her ankle-length skirt against the chair.

"It sounds a little foolish, Ted, but how have you been?"

McCann laughed. "Good, Cynthia. Better now."

"Did you find it?"

"What?"

"Success, adventure—whatever it was that made you leave."

Garraty detected a muted note of bitterness in her voice.

"Most of it."

"Not all of it?"

"Everything but you."

Mrs. Stewart averted her eyes. After a few moments, she lifted the girl to the floor. "Julie, go in the other room and play."

"I don't want to gran'ma."

"Please go, dear."

The child sulked to the door, glancing back at McCann with a hostile expression. When the door closed, Mrs. Stewart returned her attention to McCann. Watching Cynthia Stewart, Garraty understood some of McCann's feeling for her. Even at her age, traces of beauty remained, settling to a gentle grace and dignity.

—*She must have been beautiful.*

—She was.

"Tell me about the years, Ted."

Haltingly at first, McCann told her of his youth. McCann, a marine biologist, had worked for the government, a safe life, secure and sheltered. He wanted nothing more than to make some small contribution to human understanding. When he met Cynthia, life changed. Earth looked staid and conservative, offering him none of the opportunities he needed. He wanted to give Cynthia everything. He decided to leave

Earth, hoping to find rewards adequate to his ambition. His plan—to succeed quickly and return for her—seemed always just out of reach. He wandered from planet to planet, hope and rumors of opportunity pulling him on. Earth-type planets reproduced Earth's society. A man neither starved nor grew rich.

Only uninhabitable worlds offered risks and rewards. A small company, formed to exploit a planet called Geros, hired him. His marine biology background fit perfectly with the planet, a landless expanse of hostile ocean, rich in mineral wealth and danger. Methane choked its atmosphere and predatory lifeforms filled its ocean.

They planned to establish a mining colony on the ocean floor, subsisting on local flora and fauna. After extracting sufficient wealth, they would leave. The plan ran head-long into U.N. policy. Human beings must adapt to alien worlds.

They had two choices, an outlaw mining venture or adaptation. Abandoning the venture was out of the question. Too much had been invested. Since the U.N. knew of their plans, only adaptation proved feasible. McCann underwent a series of operations.

“What kind of operations?”

“Structural and metabolic alterations.”

Cynthia Stewart hesitated, unsure whether to ask her next question. “The operations changed you.”

“Yes.”

“If I may ask, how did you look?”

“The changes were substantial.”

McCann worked up in the company, owning a controlling interest by thirty.

“I consulted doctors about re-adaptation. The process was

irreversible. I was already too old to withstand the trauma. I realized I'd lost. I had everything I wanted, everything except you."

"You never tried to communicate with me."

"At first, I wanted to come back rich, to offer you everything all at once. I know it was foolish, but romance, youth, enthusiasm—something in me wanted it that way. Later, after I knew I wasn't coming back, I couldn't bring myself to communicate with you."

"I loved you."

"I know that."

"Why did you leave?"

"For you."

"For me? No. For something else. For adventure. Damn your adventure, Ted." She fell silent, wiping the tears from her eyes with a white handkerchief. The emotion had flushed her cheeks, giving an illusion of youth.

McCann pulled the tickets from his coat pocket, placing them on the coffee table in front of him.

"Cynthia."

"What?" She put the handkerchief away and sat up, inhaling deeply to calm herself.

"I can give you everything now."

She laughed, a short painful laugh that almost started her crying again. "It's too late. We're—I'm too old."

McCann showed her the tickets. "When we get to Hector, I've made arrangements for a transfer. Both of us will be young. We'll have a second chance. Cynthia, please look at me."

"It's too late, Ted."

"Why?"

"It just is. People change, I'm old."

"You don't have to be."

She looked at McCann, an unexpected hardness in her face. "Is someone else's body going to make me young again, Ted? I waited. I waited *then*, when we *were* young, and one day I knew you were never coming back. I had feelings for you. I probably loved you. But that was a long time ago." She faltered, beginning to cry again. She stood up, daubing at her cheeks with the corner of her handkerchief. "You've upset me, Ted. You see how easily old women get upset."

She started toward the door, her gait the precarious side to side movement of an old woman.

"Cynthia."

"Please. I'll be back in a moment."

—*So that's it*, said Garraty when she was gone.

McCann remained silent. Garraty could sense the intensity of McCann's feelings, compounded by Garraty's own presence.

—*You'll never get away with it.*

—We'll see.

—*They'll track you down, McCann.*

—It's been taken care of.

—*How?*

—I'm a wealthy man.

—*How are you going to take care of me, McCann?*

The hall door opened. Cynthia Stewart reappeared, her face dry but puffily around the eyes. Somehow, she seemed older to Garraty. She walked erect, avoiding McCann's eyes.

"Ted."

"Yes."

"I'm afraid you'll have to go now."

"Go?"

"I have lunch to prepare and my daughter and son-in-law will be home soon. I have to—"

"Cynthia," said McCann, standing up. Garraty sensed McCann's confusion. Responding automatically, Garraty concentrated on his own integrity, establishing as much emotional distance between McCann and himself as possible. McCann's feelings, sharp, wounded, intense, worried Garraty. He could control empathy. Residual emotion, involving the entire organism, was determined by McCann.

—*Calm down, McCann.*

Abruptly, the hall door opened, admitting the child. She pulled up short, staring at McCann.

"Gran'ma, why is the man crying?"

"He's not, dear," said Mrs. Stewart, walking toward the girl and taking her hand.

"He is. I can see him, gran'ma."

She led the girl toward the door, telling her not to worry about the man. The man was leaving and mommy would be home soon. Grandmother and granddaughter left, hand in hand.

—*McCann?*

McCann was silent.

—*Say something.*

McCann walked into the hall, the door sliding open before them. He turned toward the stairs, gazing up. Somewhere in the house, Garraty could hear the faint sound of Cynthia Stewart talking to the girl. McCann looked at the floor, shaking Garraty's head from side to side.

"I would have given her everything."

McCann turned toward the door.

Outside, the sea breeze had picked up. It harried a half dozen maple leaves across their path. McCann walked slowly

through the swirling leaves, lost in thought. Garraty wanted McCann to vent his feelings. He remembered the weeks of dis-equilibrium after the attorney transferred. McCann's feelings were stronger.

They boarded the monorail to Los Angeles, finding a seat easily in the sparse mid-day traffic. McCann gazed out the window, oblivious to the passing towns. Garraty felt McCann's sense of futility and loss. He fought the feelings, trying to imagine himself with rod in hand, playing out line, working a trout. The emotions receded.

In Long Beach, they changed to the subway. McCann was returning to the Transfer Building.

—*McCann. Listen to me. You can't transfer now. There is something called transfer shock. Listen, please.*

McCann stayed locked within himself.

—*If you transfer in the state you're in, the shock could kill you.*

—Does it matter, Garraty?

—*Yes, it matters. McCann, listen.*

McCann said nothing. Their car emerged from the tunnel, sliding into the 6th and Olive station. McCann, silent and withdrawn, exited, mounting the escalator. He rode a single step to the top. On the street, they started for the Transfer Building, a twenty-story circular building surrounded by a park.

They entered the building on the ground floor, admitted by Garraty's profile. The technician, a stocky man with firm hands, led McCann to the transfer room, helping him into the helmeted chair and beginning to set up the transfer. Throughout the procedure McCann stared straight ahead. The technician withdrew into the glass paneled control booth,

signaling with a thumbs-up gesture to indicate the transfer was ready.

—*McCann. Listen to me. Stop.*

—I would have given her everything, Garraty.

Garraty saw the technician reach for the transfer stud. Garraty wrenched, suddenly embodied. Grief overwhelmed him. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His life seemed worthless, wasted. He wept, unable to control himself.

The technician's voice, tinny on the intercom, filtered through Garraty's despair. The man was saying something. It was difficult to concentrate.

"Mike?"

Why was he talking?

"The electrocardiograph on Geros just stopped."

How could it matter, now, without Cynthia.

The Linguist

"I WON'T HAVE MY BRAIN PICKED," SHOUTED EBERLY, squinting over the rear sight of the 30-30 and aligning the bead on the rocks below. *"Not this time! Not again!"*

A faint shadow dodged from rock to rock. Eberly squeezed the trigger. The rifle bucked against his shoulder. Dirt puffed in front of the rocks. The shot had fallen short.

"Eberly, give up," came Plagio's voice, amplified by a bullhorn. *"You haven't got a chance. You can't fight us. There are too many of us."*

"Where there's life," responded Eberly, wishing he had something pithier and more original to say, *"there's hope."* He squeezed off another round. Rock shattered. A man screamed.

"You made a contract, Eberly."

"An illegal contract."

"But an enforceable contract."

Bullets splattered on the rocks around Eberly, punctuating Plagio's comment about the contract's enforceability. Specific Performance? Was that what they called making someone fulfill his contract? Eberly shrugged. Maybe they called it Specific Performance. Maybe they called it Fred. Eberly had studied law once, but that, too, was gone, plucked from his head for a fee.

He dusted the rock chips from his sleeve and decided to change position. Plagio and his men were too close. Soon they would know his exact position. Knowing it, they could surround him and wait. Even if the Mohave sun failed to cook

him, hunger and thirst would eventually defeat him; if he lost consciousness even for a minute, Plagio would sweep down on him, sedate him, carry him off and pick his brain.

Eberly shoved two replacement shells into the 30-30. He stuck a bookmark into the tattered copy of Don Quixote and stuffed it into his coat pocket with the box of shells. This time, he would finish the book. If he had to shoot Plagio himself, he would follow Don Quixote to the end.

Quietly, keeping low behind the rocks, Eberly scurried toward the ledge he had spotted earlier. He slung the rifle across his back, but hesitated before continuing the climb, glancing down. Over the ledge, the cliff fell away for two hundred meters to the desert. One slip would leave him flattened on the sand or draped over a cactus, a sack of broken bones. Yet, death with honor—even without honor—had advantages. It would cheat Plagio of his pound of engrams. Momentarily, Eberly considered jumping, then rejected the idea. Any satisfaction he might feel at cheating Plagio would be only transitory. Better to climb higher and hope for total victory.

He began a sideways shuffle along the ledge, fingertips straining in fissures to hold his body against the rock wall. Once, he glanced down. His head swirled. He looked away, stopping and leaning his sweating forehead against the cool rock. He tried to breathe deeply to calm his nerves.

“Eberly!”

“Not now,” muttered Eberly. “Don’t distract me.”

“We see you moving, Eberly. We have heat scanners on you.”

Eberly inched toward the next outcropping, trying to ignore the distracting voice.

“Submit, Eberly. You’ve done it before. It takes only a few

seconds. It is painless. Think of your wife and children. If you submit, they will continue to live in luxury. If you are killed, they will have to go on welfare. Your wife is too slow-witted to be of use to us."

Now Plagio was insulting Gloria. True, Gloria was a slow learner. It had taken her four years just to master the fundamentals of Rumanian grammar, a skill Eberly sold Plagio for fifty dollars flat fee. Considering Gloria's faulty preterit and weak future subjunctive, along with her complete inability to understand the Rumanian relative pronoun, it was probably a good price. Still, Plagio had no reason to insult her.

"Your own wife pronounced French like a Bulgarian," shouted Eberly.

An angry burst of rifle fire answered.

EBERLY REACHED the outcropping and relative safety. To the west, the sun, an elongated orange ball on the desert horizon, was setting. No one would try to cross the ledge at night. If he could hold them off until after dark, he could finish the last two hundred pages of *Don Quixote*.

Eberly unslung the rifle and positioned himself behind a tall rock with a V-shaped notch in the top, resting the gun barrel in the notch. At this distance, he would need all the stability he could find to keep Plagio pinned down. Below, he heard gravel slip. He fired twice.

"No," he muttered. "Save the ammunition. Only shoot when I see something worth shooting."

He got out the box of shells and opened it, replacing the two spent rounds and counting the rest in the fading light. Thirty

rounds, including those in the rifle. Hardly enough for a war but adequate to hold off Plagio.

"Eberly!"

"Brain picker!" shouted Eberly. *"Filthy brain picker!"*

"I harvest a crop. Nothing more. We have had a profitable arrangement in the past, Eberly. Why can't it continue?"

"Why can't I finish Don Quixote?"

"I am a reasonable man. How—"

"You are a pig and a brain picker!"

"As I was saying, I am a reasonable man, a businessman. How much do you have left to finish?"

"About two hundred pages."

A pause ensued. *"How long will it take you?"*

"In this light? All night. Maybe longer."

"How long with a good reading lamp?"

"Four or five hours."

"It's too long. The customer is waiting. He has a final exam in Spanish tomorrow at eleven a.m. He's paid in advance. We have to set up the equipment, make the extraction and the implant, then get him back to Los Angeles for the exam. Submit, Eberly. You can finish the book next time."

Next time. Eberly had already learned Spanish seven times. Each time, when he mastered the ability sufficiently to read Don Quixote, Plagio, who used Don Quixote as the objective test of Spanish mastery, extracted the skill from him, leaving Don Quixote or Sancho Panza or the beautiful Rosinante in some dire situation and Eberly unable to find out what happened. He was thankful, at least, that he could remember the plot. Plagio only took the language skill, not the information it conveyed.

"Plagio!" yelled Eberly.

"What?"

"You said the same thing last time and the time before that. It's no go. You'll never let me finish. Next time will be exactly like this time. As soon as I can read it, you'll pick my brain. I won't even know how to say buenos días."

"Read it in translation."

Infuriated by Plagio's aesthetic insensitivity, Eberly muttered, *"Carámba,"* and squeezed off three rounds. His ears rang from the explosions.

"Eberly, what was that for?"

"Because it's never the same in translation, you philistine!"

Eberly sat down behind the rocks, planning to take advantage of the last rays of sunlight. He opened Don Quixote and began looking for his place.

"Let's see, they came to the inn and Don Quixote fell asleep and—ah, here it is. The curate has just said the original cause of Don Quixote's madness was from reading books."

Eberly became immersed in his book. Eventually, the light faded completely. He withdrew a penlight from his shirt pocket, but instead of flicking it on to read, he leaned back against the rocks. His escape from Plagio's Palm Springs home had unexpectedly drained him. He had planned to escape, then make his way to the main highway and thumb a ride to Los Angeles. Somehow—probably from crashing through the window, an act he found considerably more unnerving and more difficult than in the movies (It had taken two tries and the help of the rifle butt to get through the plate glass)—his sense of direction had become addled. Instead of striking out toward the highway, he had struck out across the desert. He had expected Plagio to follow immediately.

Evidently, Plagio's henchman, Marvin The Extractor, a name referring to Marvin's occupation performing illicit engramectomies, had remained unconscious longer than expected. The glancing blow with the Ming vase, shattering the vase, had felt too light to put Marvin out long, but after an hour of walking, Eberly had looked back and seen no sign of pursuit. Only when he neared the rocks three hours later and started his climb to reconnoiter and get his bearings did he see the jeep, bouncing toward him across the desert.

"Eberly."

Eberly noticed how the voice carried in the night air, making Plagio seem to be right on top of him. "What?"

"Can we make a deal?"

"What kind of deal?"

"You submit and—"

"Never!"

"You submit and I'll give you three weeks paid vacation in Acapulco before you start on your next subject."

"What good will Acapulco be if I don't know Spanish?"

"You don't have to talk to anyone."

"I like talking to people."

"O.K., make it Miami—anywhere."

EBERLY THOUGHT about it. Plagio must be desperate. He had never offered Eberly a vacation before. He always expected Eberly to be back at the books the day after an extraction. The client must be someone big, or the son of someone big, possibly one of Plagio's superiors. In spite of the dominating figure Plagio had become in Eberly's life, Eberly knew Plagio was small fry to the Organization, that vague and only obliquely-mentioned group who financed Plagio. When

Congress outlawed engram transplants in the early 1990s, claiming it allowed the rich to become not only richer but smarter, organized crime moved in. The price to college students, harried executives without time to take night classes, or any of the myriad other slow-learners in society had actually dropped when people like Plagio took over. The American Medical Association had maintained the cost of the operation at such artificially high levels—they fought the criminalization of engram extraction tooth and nail, but popular sentiment and the proximity of a congressional election carried the day—that even the illegality of the procedure failed to sustain the high price. Nowadays, a college student with five thousand dollars and a disinclination to study—by the looks of Plagio’s balance sheet, something close to eighty percent of the students in the country engaged in “cramming” as it was colloquially called—could buy French, German, Spanish or any western language at a level sufficient to sustain them through graduate study. Slavic, Oriental and African languages, along with ancient languages, came slightly higher. Other subjects varied according to the job market. One year sciences would be expensive, the next, law or medicine. Liberal Arts seldom became economically interesting enough to transplant, except foreign languages, Eberly’s specialty. Group rates were also available, allowing students to pass around skills as needed. Plagio preferred to sell to groups, fraternities and sororities. Though the fee per person was smaller, the total was larger and the overhead—supporting people like Eberly, who had a gift for language learning (He had once learned Kurdish in seven weeks.) remained constant.

Still, if Plagio were so anxious to deliver, the customer must

be important. Did that fact give Eberly some bargaining power? Maybe. *"Plagio."*

"What?"

"Who's the customer?"

"What's it to you?"

"I've got a deal of my own to offer."

"Let's have it."

"You let me finish this book and I'll submit. Tell the customer to call in sick."

"He tried that already. His teacher doesn't give makeup exams. If he doesn't take the exam, he flunks. If he flunks, he's out of school—he's a borderline case already. If he's out of school, you know what that means."

"One less future customer for you."

"Right."

"Is that all you think about, Plagio, money?"

"It makes the world go round, Eberly."

"There's more to life than money."

"What?"

At a loss, Eberly hedged. *"Why can't you be reasonable?"*

"I think I am being reasonable. You're the one that's fighting the system and being unreasonable. What can you gain? A Pyrrhic victory?"

"A what?"

"Are you forgetting your English?"

Eberly shook his head. Pyrrhic? It was Greek to him. He shrugged and sat down, flicking on the penlight. Plagio would never understand. Things other than money drove some men, things with intrinsic merit, things without market value. He began to read. The dot of light danced across the page, illuminating accent marks and tildes. He read on. Don

Quixote, once more mounted and questing, galloped, or rather, considering the nature of the sway-backed Rosinante, plodded through Eberly's brain. If only, mused Eberly, he had some modern equivalent to Rosinante, some charger, sound of limb and ready for flight, some jennet or jade or—

"Jeep," said Eberly.

He stood up and peered around the rocks. No sign of Plagio. Vaguely outlined below him, visible in the starlight only as a rectangular lump on the sand, stood the jeep.

"But how?" wondered Eberly aloud.

If he retraced his steps, crossing the rock ledge, Plagio would see him. Plagio's heat scanner worked even better at night. Searching the rocks for an alternate exit, he found the only possibility, a sheer descent to the desert floor. Looking at the drop he felt himself sway. It would be difficult during the day. At night, it would be impossible. He decided to wait for dawn, and then descend and try for the jeep.

DAWN, TENTATIVE, gradual, then more assertive, arrived just as the battery in Eberly's penlight gave out, sending its faint emanations over the desert horizon. Though he had only ten pages to go to finish Don Quixote, he decided to postpone the pleasure. Dawn would rouse Plagio, too. If Plagio arrived before the end of the book—Eberly broke off, unwilling to let the thought appear in his mind.

He stuffed his belongings into his jacket, checked the rifle and prepared for the descent. If he were lucky, he would make it to the jeep and freedom before Plagio noticed.

"Eberly."

Should he answer? If he failed to answer, Plagio would boldly climb the rocks to inspect, thinking Eberly had escaped

in the night. He wanted Plagio pinned in the rocks as long as possible.

"What is it now, mind raper!"

"Eberly, do you have to use insulting language like that? I have always treated you fairly."

"Like a prize, Hereford, ready for milking."

"A Hereford's a steer."

"Call it what you will, brain picker! You understand what I mean."

"No, I don't, Eberly. I don't understand you at all. I thought I did, once. I thought you were like the rest of us. I thought you knew what was important in life."

"Money."

"That's right. What you can't sell in the market place isn't worth having."

"It's a form of intellectual prostitution, Plagio."

"Prostitution's a marketable skill, Eberly. If you think Gloria's game, I'm sure I can find a spot for—"

"INTELLECTUAL prostitution, I said."

"Oh, sorry. It's hard to hear in these rocks."

"You drain people's minds for profit, Plagio."

"As I said, I harvest a crop. The crop is in demand. It's the way of the world, Eberly. Submit to it."

"Submit," muttered Eberly, jacking a shell into the chamber of the 30-30, about to pop up over the top of a rock and get off a shot. He controlled himself. Plagio probably wanted him to show himself. Though Plagio would have instructed his men to shoot for the torso, thus saving the brain and its engrams, Eberly felt little comfort in the idea. Plagio could extract the engrams for up to two or three hours after death. No, he would remain hidden.

“Eberly.”

“What?”

“When did you suddenly get morality?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve worked with me for the last ten years. You’ve never complained before.”

“I never complained because I was hooked.”

“Narcotics? They will interfere with your learning capacity, Eberly.”

“Not narcotics—money!”

A sarcastic edge came into Plagio’s amplified voice. *“But now you’re not hooked.”*

Eberly thought about Gloria, about the kids, Ephraim and Ezekiel, both born when he was studying Biblical Greek. The money, arriving every Friday like clock-work, never late, never short, had kept him going. Each time he wanted to do something for himself—branch out into business, or go back to school and learn something unsaleable (History or Literature)—money and the soft seduction of luxury, along with Gloria’s spendthrift nature, kept his nose in a grammar book, conjugating Estonian verbs. Ten years without once doing something for himself. Ten years without taking his eyes from the demands of the market place. Ten years without doing something for its intrinsic worth. It was ten years too long. Plagio might know what Hereford meant—a Hereford could be sold on the market—but he would never understand the meaning of intrinsic worth, a thing done for itself, a windmill tilted. No, Eberly was no longer hooked, at least for the moment, on money. He was hooked on something more compelling, something he had to do, if only once, for himself. Casting his eyes up to the last fading star in the west, Eberly,

hand in his jacket pocket, held tightly to *Don Quixote*.

"It's time to try for the jeep."

THE DESCENT WAS steeper than Eberly anticipated. He tore his pantleg on the rocks, almost dropped the rifle once, and hung by his fingertips innumerable times, sweating and scrambling for a foothold. Eventually, hands torn and bleeding from the sharp rocks, he dropped the last three meters to the desert, narrowly missing a kangaroo rat, who looked at him—frozen except for its twitching nose—then fled.

"You're lucky," said Eberly to the vanished rat. "No Plagios in your life."

During his descent, the sun had climbed up the sky. It baked the desert and broiled Eberly. June was a less than accommodating month in the Mohave. Eberly wished he had a hat. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve, planning his next move. Approach the jeep by stealth or rush it? Should he try for the jeep at all? Plagio or one of his men might be close to it. They could put a bullet through him before he could drop the jeep into low. Perhaps he should exploit his small advantage and head into the desert. And the keys, what if they were in Plagio's pocket? Eberly glanced at the sun. He could almost hear it crackling. No, the desert was out. It had to be the jeep, the jeep or surrender—

"Never."

The keys. If the keys were missing, he could sabotage the jeep and try to escape on foot. Either way, it was his only chance.

Keeping low, he worked his way around the base of the rock pile. With luck, Plagio would be above him, looking up and shouting into his bullhorn.

“Eberly.”

Hypothesis proved. Plagio was still talking to him. Getting no answer, Plagio would be drawn farther up the rocks and farther away from the jeep.

“Eberly, answer me.”

Eberly chuckled, amused at fooling Plagio, then tensed, freezing behind a man-sized boulder. The scraping footsteps of a man descending in gravel had frozen him. Cautiously, he peered around the boulder, keeping low. The jeep stood on a sand dune about twenty meters from the rocks. Marvin The Extractor, his elongated head like a loaf of bread with hair, approached it. Horror-struck, Eberly watched as Marvin leaned across the driver's seat and plucked the keys from the ignition. Plagio was one step ahead of him.

Throwing caution, and, inadvertently, his penlight, to the wind, Eberly—leaving his crouch behind the rocks like a Marine leaving a landing craft, rifle gripped at the small of the stock and the barrel, holding it almsot horizontal before him, a fearsome, bared-tooth leer on his face—charged. Charging on sand proved a slow business. Still, he managed to surprise Marvin, noting, before Marvin turned, the white bandage on the back of Marvin's head where the vase had landed.

Marvin turned, saw Eberly struggling up the dune, started to laugh—pointing his finger—as Eberly took a comic pratfall in the loose sand, changed his mind and went for his sidearm, a .45 in a flap holster. Marvin's attempted laugh fueled Eberly's rage. Eberly reached the top of the dune. Marvin had the holster flap up and the gun half-withdrawn. Eberly swung with the rifle butt, connecting with the side of Marvin's loaf-shaped head. Marvin, staring blankly, dazed, stood a moment after the blow, shook his head once, then wilted. His unconscious body began rolling down the dune like a log.

Rolling, Marvin's .45 went off.

"Damn it," muttered Eberly, frowning, "why don't you tell the whole world, Marvin."

The shot would bring Plagio. Eberly scrambled after the rolling man. Abruptly, Marvin stopped rolling, almost tripping Eberly. Eberly knelt and gave the prone figure a slight nudge. It flopped on its back, snorting sand and beginning to breathe again. Quickly, Eberly rifled the pockets, coming up with two sets of keys, one presumably for the jeep and the other for Marvin's car.

He shook Marvin.

"Wake up, you creep."

Marvin's eyes started to open, narrow slits in the sand-matted face. Eberly dangled both sets of keys before Marvin's eyes.

"Which of these fits the jeep?"

The eyes closed. The head lolled.

"Marvin, damn it, wake up." He slapped Marvin once. The blow succeeded only in pushing Marvin father down the dune.

Sand kicked up near Marvin's head, followed almost immediately by the sound of rifle fire. Eberly looked up. Plagio and two men, half inch figures resting their rifles on rocks, fired at him.

Taking both sets of keys, he left Marvin and started up the dune. Sand hopped and jumped around his feet. He heard one stray round plink off the jeep. Only when he reached the relative safety of the opposite side of the jeep did he look back. Plagio, kneeling, and the two men, standing behind him and firing, had reached the base of the rock pile.

Eberly steadied the rifle across the hood of the jeep and fired four quick rounds. Though he could see none of them

hit, Plagio, scurrying for the rocks, must have gotten the message.

Eberly reloaded and got into the jeep. Frantically, he tried the keys, innumerable keys on both chains. Why did Marvin carry so many keys? Vaguely, Eberly remembered a comment of Plagio's. Marvin, before setting up as an engram extractor, had stolen cars. It explained much of Marvin's character, the joy he took in his work. Stealing cars, stealing engrams, they both gave Marvin the same illicit thrill. A key fit.

Eberly stomped the clutch to the floor and twisted the key. The jeep ground, coughed and caught, coming alive. He jammed the gearshift into first and popped the clutch. The jeep lurched, almost seemed to hop, and then stopped, stalled.

Eberly restarted it, this time gently releasing the clutch. The engine uttered a decrescendo of slowing, labored, lugging noises, stalling.

Eberly checked the emergency brake—off—then leaned out to look at the front tire—flat. At the instant Eberly had popped the clutch, Plagio's aim had evidently proven true. It accounted for the hopping sensation.

"What now?" asked Eberly, staring at the flat tire.

A bullet shattered the windshield, leaving a hole surrounded by a spiderweb of cracked glass.

"Take cover," answered Eberly.

He got out of the jeep and crawled under it, positioning himself so Plagio would have to charge straight up the dune and into his rifle fire.

Furtively, Plagio attempted to dart from the rocks. Eberly fired. Sand spurted at Plagio's feet. The figure retreated, shaking its fist at Eberly. After several seconds, the bullhorn came on.

"Eberly."

Eberly cupped his hands around his mouth, answering. "What?"

"You can't escape now. You may have us pinned down but we've got you pinned down, too. And that jeep isn't going anywhere. It's a standoff, Eberly. Give up."

SUDDENLY, inexplicably, doubt surfaced in Eberly's mind. Plagio was right, a standoff. What could he hope to gain by resisting Plagio? Actually, the man wanted nothing more than his due, completion of the illegal contract. What was wrong with that? In return, Eberly would get not only his life, something he had always found useful, but life in luxury.

Conscious of his own mortality, conscious of the shortness of life, conscious also that he was outgunned, Eberly considered submitting. He had responsibilities, Gloria and the children. Selfishness, a quality he abhorred on principle though practiced from time to time, was no reason to deny his family the good life, was it? He imagined Gloria in the welfare line, dressed in rags, hair frazzled, people crowding in front of her. He imagined Ephraim and Ezekiel, selling pencils, begging from strangers, their eyes tear-filled and pitiful. And why?

Eberly crawled out from under the jeep, disgusted with himself, preparing to surrender. He stood up and took the copy of Don Quixote from his pocket, glaring at it.

"Because of you," he snarled. "That's why!"

He hurled the book to the sand and began hopping on it with both feet.

"You! You! You! Traitor! Seducer! What the hell good are you anyway?"

He stopped hopping, stepping back from the book. It had fallen on its spine, open to the page with Eberly's bookmark.

He looked at the half-buried book, breathing deeply and trying to control his fury, pondering.

A bullet whizzed past his ear, jerking him from his ponderings. He dropped to the sand, nose inches from the book. Plagio, unaware of Eberly's intent to surrender, was still firing.

"*Plagio,*" shouted Eberly.

The firing ceased. "*What?*"

"*I want—*" The words seemed to stick in his throat.

"*You want what?*"

"*I want to—*" Eberly broke off his attention attracted by the page in front of his nose. He began to read.

"*You want to what?*" coaxed Plagio.

"Just a minute."

"*Eberly?*"

"*Just a minute!*"

Eberly became lost in the knight's final return home. Sancho Panza's wife, Joan Panza, after asking about the health of Sancho's donkey (Better, answered the squire, than that of the master), inquired what profit the squire had gained from his adventures, what dresses for Mrs. Panza, what shoes for the children?

I bring none of these things, good wife, quoth Sancho, although I bring other things of more moment and estimation.

"More moment and estimation," mumbled Eberly, sniffing, a tear beginning its journey down his cheek. Doubt again surfaced in his mind, this time challenging his desire to surrender. His voice changed, hardening, determination encrusting every syllable.

"More moment and estimation."

He looked over the top of the book. Plagio was nowhere in sight.

“*Plagio!*”

No answer. He looked down the sloping dune. Something odd, or rather, the lack of something odd—Marvin—attracted his attention. Had Marvin revived? Or—

Grasping the book in one hand and the rifle in the other, Eberly crawled under the jeep, elbows and knees dragging him forward. He reached the crest of the dune. Temorously, he looked over. The dune dipped in the area of Marvin’s body, creating natural cover, obscuring Eberly’s line of fire. He could see the tops of three heads behind the dip. While Eberly read, Plagio and his men had reached Marvin. They advanced out of the divot on their stomachs. Seeing him, they fired, rifles blazing in rapid succession. Sand hopped and skipped on all sides.

Repositioning the book slightly, Eberly rested the rifle barrel along the book’s inner crease and aimed. He fired twice, halting Plagio’s advance. He glanced down at the page next to the barrel, reading on.

Proceeding in this manner, firing and reading, pausing occasionally to turn a page or reload, Eberly impeded Plagio’s advance and followed Don Quixote’s. He read through the sonnets and epitaphs of the last few pages, eventually arriving at both the last paragraph and his last bullet.

A scholar, read Eberly, had been given the moldy, time-worn papers treating of the life and doings of *Don Quijote de la Mancha* and had, according to the author, (someone named Cervantes) deciphered them. They promised to tell of further exploits, a third sally for the great knight.

“A third sally,” said Eberly, closing the book and firing the last round. Another tear formed in his eye as he wistfully imagined the third sally.

“*Eberly.*”

The voice of reality. “*What?*”

“*By my count, you’re out of ammunition. We’re coming up.*”

Eberly rolled on his back, throwing his arms out to either side and letting the sun warm his face. He spoke quietly. “Come and get me, vulture. I’m ready.”

He could hear Plagio marching up the dune. What had Plagio scheduled him for next time? Ah, yes, Russian. For the fifth time, Russian. In that word, Eberly saw his future. Russian would be harder than Spanish. First of all, that funny alphabet, like barbed-wire he would have to penetrate to get at the language. Secondly, it would take more time and effort to plan carefully, plus more endurance to carry out the plan. Momentarily, he shuddered at the rigors that lay ahead. At the same time, he welcomed them. What else could a man do who was driven from within? What else could a man do who was only on page fifteen of *War and Peace*?

The Satyr

NO WOMEN! NO BOOZE! WHAT DO THEY TAKE ME FOR, some kind of animal! They keep me caged like an animal. What did I ever do to them? What did I ever do to anyone, even Hench?

I should have seen it coming. For that, I blame myself. For everything else, I blame Hench. The whole thing is his fault, his responsibility. A starship to the middle of nowhere and a life in the mines—how could he do it? and to *me*, of all creatures!

I should have seen most of it coming the day Hench said we were going to see the Merton woman's father. Hench seldom took me out. He called our trips out disasters.

I remember Hench putting me in a new tunic, parting my hair in the middle, combing it over my ears and stepping back to admire his work.

"You'll do."

I eyed him, suspicious. "For what?"

Hench flicked a piece of lint off my shoulder. "What's it to you?"

"I like to keep track of what's going on in your head, Hench." I tugged at the front of my tunic. "New clothes, shined shoes, going out—something's fishy. You're not planning anything foolish like marrying that Merton woman are you?"

"Not yet." He told me about the appointment with her father.

I frowned. I knew Merton's reputation. He exploited

worlds, most of them hostile. "What's the appointment about?"

Hench ignored the question and started for the door. "Let's go."

We took the mono downtown to Merton Planetary Development. Even public transportation put a strain on Hench's small budget. In spite of his hybrid genius, crossing biogenetic engineer and artist, things had gone poorly for Hench. As a businessman, he left something to be desired, namely, money. He mortgaged everything—laboratory, equipment, car—to create me. He could balance that incredibly complex process of genetic transplantation, followed by biochemical gestation, followed by education through artificial engram implantation, but not his checkbook. They repossessed the car first. Eventually, everything would go, except me, of course. I had no intention of going anywhere.

Hench's money problems stemmed from one source. No one wanted his product. Better cows and horses through genetic manipulation, yes, better dogs and cats—people could accept improvements on what they already knew—but new creatures, unique creatures, they found repulsive.

They even found *me* repulsive. No one objected to a chest-high, two-toed helper with bristly hair, a broad nose and leaf-shaped ears. They had seen pictures of satyrs. No one even objected to my strength and intelligence. What they claimed to object to was my pleasant disposition. They considered me unreliable. I take a drop now and then. I like the ladies. Does that make me unreliable? Still, no one wanted me. No one, except, perhaps, Merton.

Hench and I took the elevator up to Merton's offices.

"Hench, I thought you'd given up on this hare-brained scheme."

“What hare-brained scheme?”

“Selling me.”

Hench avoided looking at me. I knew the reaction. I had guessed right. Every time Hench told me about a potential customer, he avoided looking at me. Every time he reported failure, he looked relieved. At first, I took this as a sign Hench liked me. Finally, I realized the true basis of his attitude. He felt responsible for me. I was his creation. A peculiar notion, responsibility, but useful.

The elevator arrived at Merton's offices. I could see the entire floor from the reception area, a central bay with row after row of gnomelike computer technicians at their consoles, all monitoring Merton's empire. Lights appeared and faded in front of them. Information filled screens and vanished. The empire was safe under their bloodshot eyes.

Of more immediate interest was the receptionist, a bird-legged girl with acne. She did have one point in her favor. She was female. Any port in a storm.

Hench talked to the receptionist a few seconds, then glanced at me. “Wait here.”

I gave the receptionist an appreciative once-over. “Anything you say, Hench.”

I waited on the couch opposite the bird-legged receptionist. When Hench disappeared into Merton's office, I grinned at her. Hench had told me not to grin in public. He said people found scraggly teeth repulsive. What did he know? I made out better with the ladies than he did. All he had was the Merton woman.

The receptionist noticed me grinning at her and shifted uneasily on her chair. Her eyes returned to the paperwork on her desk. She knew I was watching, inspecting, appreciating. She tried to concentrate in spite of me.

She failed. "Is there something I can do for you, sir?"

My grin widened. "Indeed, there is."

"What?"

"Is there someplace we can be alone and . . . talk?"

She looked around. For help? Possibly. "What did you want to talk about, Mr.—" Her almost nonexistent eyebrows remained elevated, waiting for my answer.

"Silenus. Where can we chat?"

"I think right here will be satisfactory."

"I don't mind, but . . ." I glanced toward the gnomes at their computers. ". . . you may find it a little too public. Is there, perhaps, a bar in the building with romantically subdued lighting?"

"Yes, on the top floor, but—"

"Good." I stood up and extended my elbow. "Shall we go?"

I could see the struggle going on behind her eyes. She found me repulsive—bristly hair, scraggly teeth, faintly jaundiced complexion—yet, interesting. Both are common reactions.

I decided to nudge her interest. "I come equipped with a sizeable advantage."

Wrong nudge. Persnickety type. All interest faded from her eyes. She looked slightly sick. I knew I would have to resort to stronger measures to give her the kind of memories she would secretly cherish for a lifetime.

I started toward her. "You're absolutely right, my dear. Actions do speak louder than words."

Before I reached her, she bolted, scooping up an armload of papers and heading across the computer bay on her bird legs. I considered chasing her—I love a good chase—but decided against it. She would probably scream and bring Hench.

"Miss," I called after her. "*I shall return. If Mr. Hench comes out of his meeting, tell him I'm in the bar.*"

I took the elevator up to the top floor. The doors opened on a sign reading Olympus Club. The name put me in a good mood. Part of my basic education includes large doses of Greek mythology. Hensch wanted my personality to reflect my appearance. Hensch makes all sorts of mistakes.

I went unnoticed in the subdued light. Along with the new suit, Hensch had given me a few coins to squander. I climbed up on a barstool and ordered a half-dozen screwdrivers in a large brandy glass. I go through phases, wine, beer, bourbon, Scotch—at the time, it was vodka.

I paid and downed half the snifter. The bartender, shining a glass, watched me. Shortly, I felt good enough to sing.

I sang.

The bartender, evidently no music lover, stopped shining the glass, frowning. Several people at the bar turned to listen. The bartender asked me to stop.

“*Stop?* Are you kidding? This is one of my favorite songs.”

He said there were ladies in the room.

“Ladies? Ladies?” I looked around. Here and there, I could see several lovely faces watching me. “Why so there are!”

I climbed up on the barstool, stepped onto the bar and began singing for the ladies, doing a soft-shoe down the shiny surface and playing to them with open arms. Several of the women looked shocked at the lyrics. Most of the men smiled.

I sang on.

The bartender, still frowning, tried to catch me.

I evaded him, tapping out a two-step before I hopped away from each swipe of his thick arms. My polished shoes sounded on the bar and glittered in the light. I sang my heart out, pathos, bathos—you name it. Then I made a mistake. I stopped long enough to pluck up my drink from the bar. The bartender, aided by two other tone-deaf men in white aprons

from the kitchen, grabbed me, ejected me and told me to leave the building before they called a security guard.

I ignored this insensitive criticism of my performance and touched the button for Merton's floor. I reentered Merton's offices feeling pleasantly amorous, the full effect of the screwdrivers beginning to take hold. I wondered whether I could coax, chase, or threaten the bird-legged receptionist into the elevator long enough to have her.

She saw me coming but stood her ground, or rather sat it, remaining at her desk. I walked up, went around the desk and faced her. With her seated, we were the same height.

"Madame," I began, an ingratiating smile on my face.

"You've been drinking."

"Don't scold. A bit of the grape, or, in this case, the potato."

"What do you want?"

In sexual matters, I believe in being frank. I put my hand on her thigh.

Her eyes enlarged noticeably, making them close to normal size. "Please take your hand off me."

I stroked.

She slapped my hand.

I stepped closer, inhaling her perfume—a scent that reminded me, subtly, of Hench's laboratory—and put my arms around her waist. Delicately, I kissed her throat.

She thrashed, arms flailing.

I ignored this mild protest. Resistance adds something special to their inevitable submission. I persisted.

She kicked.

I avoided.

Her chair teetered. I dragged her to the floor. A watebasket

overturned near our heads, *thunk*, spilling balls of paper around us.

I murmured. "My sweet rose, it will not be long now. My jewel, my buttercup, my plum, I burn with desire for you."

She responded to this eloquence by continuing to thrash and squirm.

"Submit, my treasure. You need not tell your husband. You will only hurt his feelings."

She screamed.

I felt hands grabbing at my tunic. I clutched my treasure to me and rolled away from them, ignoring the gathering crowd, continuing to murmur.

"Ahh, my wondrous blossom, my—"

Abruptly, a sharp pain went through my ribs. I was jerked away from my wondrous, bird-legged blossom.

Hench, glaring into my face, shook me. My head bobbed with each shake. "*Why* (shake, bob), *why* do you do these things?"

"What things?"

"Can't you control yourself, dammit, even in public?"

"I tried to get her to go someplace private, Hench. She wouldn't listen."

"Why can't you at least control yourself for five minutes?"

"Is it my fault?"

"It's your responsibility."

"Don't be silly, Hench. Only human beings are responsible. I am what I am."

A murmur went through the crowd. Not human? An animal? Someone, probably Merton, explained.

A biosynthetic? They looked at me with renewed interest, their mood changed. Able to classify me as something other

than human, they no longer considered me a rapist, only an animal, poorly trained or perhaps not yet housebroken.

They backed off slightly. Even the receptionist, now on her feet, looked sympathetic, or semisympathetic.

Hench grabbed me by the shoulder and pushed me through the crowd toward Merton's office.

I glanced up at him. "What are you going to do?"

He pushed again, harder.

I looked over my shoulder and shouted to the crowd. *"If you hear screams, he's beating me. Call the police or the humane society or someone."*

"Shut up," growled Hench, "or I'll crack your skull."

He gave me a shove into Merton's office.

I had to stand in the middle of the room. Hench and Merton inspected me as though I were a new piece of office equipment, Hench, the salesman, demonstrating my finer points, Merton, nodding and willing to listen but unwilling to be sold a useless product.

Hench listed my virtues: the strength of ten (Hench exaggerates), the endurance of a machine, capable of independent action—

"Speaking of independent action, John," interrupted Merton, "can you explain that incident with our receptionist?"

Hench looked embarrassed. He scowled in my direction and tried to explain. "He has the ability to reproduce, another advantage from your point of view."

Though to me the advantage seemed obvious—as well as sizeable—Merton looked dubious.

Hench persevered. “A creature like this would only have to be seeded on a planet. After that, nature would provide you with as many workers as needed.”

“An army,” I added, imagining my only mission in life to populate an entire planet. But Hench had forgotten one important point. “Hench.”

“What?” snapped Hench, annoyed.

“It takes two to tango—at *least* two—but the more the merrier I always say.”

“The creature’s right, John. Can you produce females of his species?”

“The brides of Frankenstein,” I suggested.

“Yes, that’s possible,” answered Hench.

I shook my head, exasperated with Hench. “All these years, Hench, you’ve been holding out on me.”

“Did you hear me tell you to shut up?”

“Do I care what you tell me?”

“You’d better care of you won’t eat tonight.”

I shut up. I did want to eat. Hench was forever holding that over my head. He had worked up a penalty scale, tying it to my food. The more I disobeyed, the less I ate. I found myself on an involuntary diet most of the time.

Hench continued his explanation. “The entire process takes about two years. The female version—I have had a few problems making one up to now—the female version would be ready to reproduce five years after that.”

“Hench, you don’t have to go to all that trouble just for me. There are plenty of women around.”

“I told you to shut up.”

“Yep, Hench, you did do that.”

We glared at each other, deadlocked.

Merton intervened. "He doesn't seem to follow orders very well."

"You have to kick him occasionally, or take away his food."

"Go ahead, Hench, beat me—but I'll scream. You'll have the humane society on your neck."

Hench snorted. He threatened to beat me frequently. He seldom did. He usually snorted and wandered away, muttering about the allowances people had to make for creatures like me.

"And the life span, how long do they live?"

"Frankly, I don't know. He's a prototype."

I gave a prototypical grin, teeth clenched, lips folded back.

Merton automatically started to respond to the grin, then caught himself, his expression degenerating to a sort of sick look. He addressed me directly for the first time. "You do seem like an intelligent creature."

"So do you."

"Perhaps too intelligent."

"Actually," interrupted Hench, probably envisioning the entire deal going down the drain, "it's only a superficial intelligence. His real level of understanding is rudimentary." Hench turned to me, his face taking on the expression adults use with children. He pronounced his words distinctly. "Go and sit down. Do you understand me? Go and sit down."

I considered standing on my head to defy Hench. It would only have made his point, dumb animal. I walked to the nearest chair and sat down.

Merton looked like he bought exactly zero of Hench's "superficial intelligence" argument. Still, I suspected it gave him a rationalization to pass along to the board of directors.

They would not be consigning a quasi-human to this hostile world they wanted populated, but only a “superficially intelligent biosynthetic construct,” i.e. me.

Merton stood up, indicating an end to the interview. He shook hands with Hench and said he would give his answer within a week. Hench led the way out the door.

In the elevator, after a prolonged parting wink at the receptionist, I asked Hench about the odds on Merton accepting the deal. Hench told me about Merton. Overextended in six directions from earth, Merton had sunk most of the company’s remaining assets into colonizing and exploiting some world in the middle of nowhere. Merton had one problem. No one wanted to colonize it. That part bothered me. It reminded me too much of “hostile worlds.” If no one wanted to go, they had reasons. Merton needed manpower or his empire would collapse. Hench, on the other hand, needed money.

The Merton woman had convinced her father to consider solving both problems with a single blow. Instead of manpower, she suggested satyr-power. She even went so far as to suggest I ought to work for my keep, a truly vicious idea.

I asked Hench if he intended to sell me into slavery.

He avoided looking at me and told me to shut up.

“Selling your only begotten—or, rather, synthesized—son into slavery! Hench, you’re an immoral man, no better than us beasts.”

“What do you know about morality?”

“I know human beings talk about it a lot. What else do I need . . .”

“I told you to shut up. I’m thinking.”

“Do I care if you’re thinking? Sell me off like a sack of potatoes. Hench, you’re of dubious value as a father figure.”

The elevator reached the ground floor, slowed and stopped. Hench snapped his finger. “Got it!”

“You’ve got it all right. I don’t know what it is, but you’ve got it. The more I think about it, the more I think you got it from that Merton woman.”

“If I change the thyroid hormone balance, along with the aldosterone level, inactivating the glutamic dehydrongenase so there’s less glutamic acid and consequently less ammonia and alpha-ketoglutaric acid. . . .”

Hench kept babbling in this manner all the way back to the laboratory, his eyes becoming progressively more glazed the deeper he got into the problem. I had to lead him the last few blocks by the hand. When we got to the laboratory, he wrote down his brainstorm, covering large sheets of paper with cryptic chemical symbols and mathematics. He stayed at it for hours, oblivious to distraction.

An hour past my dinner time, he sat back, head lolling, writing arm dangling, drained. “Finished.”

“Finished what?”

“Your mate, a Maenad, a nymph or whatever you call them.”

“Fine, let’s see the wench.”

I moved up to the desk, expecting at least a drawing. Hench showed me formulas, page after page of them. Added to the computerful of formulas he had prepared to create me, they would produce my mate. I hoped she looked better than Hench’s chicken scratchings.

I looked up at Hench. “Only one?”

“As many as you like.”

"I like a lot, but won't mass production spoil quality?" I looked at the bland formulas. "Frankly, Hench, I'd rather see a production model, or a reproduction model."

Hench gave me an exasperated glance. "You dwell on sex, do you know that?"

"Only as does a starving man on food. Speaking of food—"

"Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"Dwell on sex."

"*You're* the one who gave me the extra Y-chromosome. *You're* the one who wanted to make sure I could reproduce. You tell me."

Hench grunted. "Talk about something else."

"Okay, let's talk about this slave sale you're conducting. Why are you selling me?"

The question annoyed him. "Look, I'm in business. I make creatures, then I sell them. Business is business."

"Materialist."

Hench grunted again and avoided looking at me.

"What do they do on this godforsaken planet, anyway?"

"Mining."

"*Mining!* You're sending me off to the salt mines! You're *inhuman*, Hench."

"Business is business. Do you know what you cost? Plus—"

"Prototypes are always expensive."

"*Plus*, you aren't good for anything more complicated than physical labor. You can't concentrate on anything but sex for more than two minutes."

"That's not true. I just don't want to concentrate on most of the things human beings do."

"It amounts to the same thing on the job market."

“The *job* market! Money again! Is that all you can think about, HENCH? You dwell on money, do you know that? Since you met that Merton woman, that’s all you can think about—money, money, money. She’s got you by the bank book, HENCH.”

“I don’t have a bank book.”

“You will, as soon as old man Merton ships me off to the salt mines, you and that Merton woman will be rolling in dough, not to mention the hay. I’d like to get that woman in the hay for five minutes and show her what life’s all about. It isn’t money.”

Abruptly, HENCH slapped me.

I just about grabbed him and threw him across the room. My sense of enlightened self-interest asserted itself. I controlled the urge. If I threw him across the room, I would never be able to work on his conscience.

I let my face sting and glared at him. “You’re responsible for me, HENCH! I’m your creation! If you sell me, you’ll be selling your self-respect!”

That night, HENCH locked me in my room to prevent escape. The next day, he let me out long enough to clean the laboratory and myself, then locked me up again, a broom returned to its closet. It sounds cruel, night after night locked away from life, liquor and the ladies. Except for my profound ability with locks, it would have been cruel. Every night, when HENCH left for his rendezvous with the Merton woman, I unlocked the door and crept out.

Without money, spirits are hard to come by. I rifled coin return slots on public phones, occasionally turning up enough loose change for a short snort. I looked for women but found

none alone. When I got cold or tired or hungry, I went back to the laboratory. I decided to give Hensch until the last possible minute to change his mind. Why leave a warm bed and good food before necessary?

During my daily outings to scrub and sweep, I noticed Hensch's anxiety. He suffered from conscience. I let him suffer. The more it ate at him—his desire for the Merton woman, money and possibly fame warring with his sense of responsibility for me—the better chance I had. I watched the moral battles played out on his face. The closer we got to the date of Merton senior's decision, the more intense the battles became, attack and counterattack causing Hensch to pace the laboratory, scowling and mumbling, or pause long minutes in an abstracted trance.

Toward the end of the week, I was off in one corner of the main workroom, filling the autoclave with glassware, when the Merton woman came in. She failed to notice me. Hensch, engaged in hand-to-hand combat with his conscience, had forgotten me.

She walked across the workroom to Hensch, hugged him and gave him a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, announcing *good news*.

The only good news I could see her bringing were those flanks, sleek, solid—no bird legs there. I ached to have her on the spot.

Hensch gazed at her with a love-struck smile on his face, his moral dilemma temporarily forgotten as his hormones took over. "What good news?"

"Father has decided to use your creature."

Bad news, definitely bad news.

Her delighted enthusiasm continued. "It's just marvelous,

darling. I'm sure father will give us enough in advance to pay off those horrible debts and have a long honeymoon." She noticed a change in HENCH's expression and frowned slightly. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure I should do it."

She gave an exasperated sigh and shook her head. "We've been all through this a million times, dear. It's only an animal. You've sold animals before."

"Not like him."

"Darling, you're too close to the situation. You created it. You've begun to see more in it than is there. I appreciate your feelings. It must be like selling a very smart pet. It's regrettable but necessary. It's not just me you have to worry about. It's your work. Without money, your work will stop completely. It already *has* stopped completely. You are a great man, John. Don't let that *thing* keep you from being all you can be."

That *thing* continued to listen to this line of bullshit until its teeth ground. HENCH's conscience needed help. I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted across the workroom. "*She's only after your money, HENCH!*"

Both of them became aware of me. The Merton woman turned a look of acid contempt in my direction. "John, please get that filthy animal out of here."

"Filthy or not, I'm right. Old man Merton's done for without me. HENCH, she's just trying to soft soap you into becoming a millionaire slave trader. Don't listen to her."

The Merton woman kept looking at me, disgust evident on her face. "And just what is wrong with becoming a millionaire?"

I ignored her. "Slave trader, HENCH. It's cost you your dignity and your soul and your self-respect. You're responsi-

ble for me. You made me. Sending me to the mines is evil and wrong.”

Words like “evil” and “wrong,” “responsibility” and “self-respect” usually struck a responsive chord in Hench. In spite of that, he told me to go to my room or he would crack my skull.

Reluctantly, I went, winking at the Merton woman (what flanks!) on the way out.

I could hear them arguing from my room. Even on their way to dinner, I heard Hench stressing words like “responsibility” and “doing the right thing,” while the Merton woman stressed eternal, nuptial bliss “and the money, darling. Don’t forget the money.”

That night, I resolved to leave. If I waited too long, the Merton woman would seduce Hench in more senses than one. Hench, guilty as he felt, would deport me. I put on my suit, unlocked the door and started out.

I followed the corridor past the laboratory workrooms and downstairs. Hench’s office door was open, a sharp rectangle of light falling across the darkened hall. I would have to sprint past the office to get to the double doors at the end of the corridor.

I readied myself for the dash, getting down into a half-crouch, fingers arched against the polished floor.

I hesitated, hearing voices—Hench and the Merton woman arguing in his office. I tiptoed to the doorway, pressing myself against the wall and listening. The Merton woman was pleading with Hench.

“Darling, you *have* to do it. As much as you hate it, you don’t have any choice.”

“I do have a choice. Until I sign that contract with your

father, I have a choice. I created him. I'm responsible for him."

I hesitated a moment longer. Hensch's conscience seemed to be holding its own.

"It's not like it was human, darling. In the most basic sense, it's simply a product."

"That's exactly the point, he's not human. In some ways, he's completely inhuman. If he were human, at some point he would begin to take care of himself and be responsible for what he does. But he's not human at all. He's my creation and my responsibility."

"You'll lose the laboratory. You owe—"

Something slammed down on Hensch's desk, cutting her off. "I know what I owe, *dammit!* Money, money, money—is that all anyone thinks about?"

"It's a vicious animal, dear. It belongs someplace away from people. You know the kinds of things it's done. It's utterly amoral."

Hensch's voice took on a note of despair. "That's my fault, too. He's what I made him, whether I intended it or not. I'm responsible for everything he is, including that."

The Merton woman gave one last, unreasoned appeal. "Darling, please get rid of it—for me."

A long pause followed. I heard Hensch get up and pace the office. A shadow, Hensch's, filled the rectangle of light on the floor in front of me. I pressed myself closer to the wall.

At last, Hensch spoke. "I can't."

My heart sang! Saved by Hensch's conscience!

I tiptoed away from the door and back upstairs. Going to my room, I whistled and sang and cavorted, doing several forward flips (my favorites). I relocked the door, took off my

clothes and went to bed. I drifted off to a pleasant sleep composing a song to HENCH's conscience. Fortunately, before inflicting too many verses on myself, I fell asleep.

Something scraped. My eyes blinked open. A key turned in the lock. I glanced at the window. No daylight. A midnight visit from HENCH? Unlikely. The light came on. The door opened.

The Merton woman, still dressed for her evening out with HENCH—a sleek tube dress, black, glittering, low cut, a single strand of pearls around her throat—stepped into the cell and stood by the door, looking at me.

I looked past her at the partially open door. "Where's HENCH?"

"He's gone home. I came back."

I sat up on the bed. "Does he know you're here?"

She looked at me, her revulsion (and something else—what? A spark of fascination?) clear on her face. "Please cover yourself."

I grinned.

She picked my tunic off the chair and tossed it across my lap.

I continued grinning. "Satisfied?"

"You are a disgusting creature."

"I know." I watched her flanks, the muscles clearly visible through the shiny cloth. "What do you want?"

"John has decided to keep you."

"Good news."

"Bad news. It will bankrupt him."

"So? What's the tragedy?"

"Don't you care?"

“He’ll find work to support us.” I hesitated. “The three of us.”

Her back went rigid. “I’m not going to let it happen.”

“I don’t see how you can stop it. Hench is a man of conscience.”

Her hand came around from behind her. She held one of the dart guns Hench uses to tranquilize, occasionally kill, us beasts. I could tell the setting by the color coding on the chamber. She had it set on kill.

Her hand shook slightly. “You will go tomorrow.”

“Why do you hate me?”

Her expression, stern, wavered. The question caught her off-guard. “This is for John.”

I laughed. “Human beings only do things for themselves. Don’t you know that yet?”

“It’s for John. I won’t have our lives ruined by a freak.”

“I’m only a freak because I’m too much like you. Hench is different, but you and I are two of a kind. We do what we have to do to get what we want.”

“If you don’t agree to go tomorrow, I’ll kill you now.”

“I agree.”

She had expected an argument, resistance. Her surprise showed on her face.

I shrugged. “I’m a coward.”

I am also a liar, but it seemed best to avoid mentioning that.

Her determination softened. Some thought or speculation flitted behind her eyes. Enough of it showed to let me recognize it. I glanced at the dart gun. Distracted by her speculation, she had let her thumb wander from the trigger button.

I looked at her flanks a moment, then up at her eyes, catch-

ing her attention. Once I had it, I lunged. I knocked aside the gun. It flew out of her hand, hit the wall and discharged ineffectually against the floor, the propellant exploding with a loud *poomp* in the small room.

I grabbed her and pulled her down on the bed, beginning to whisper softly. "We are alone, my blossom. No one will interrupt. We may do as we wish, as you have always wished. There's no one here but us satyrs."

I slept soundly until mid-morning. I expected Hench to wake me early. He usually arrived at the laboratory before seven and let me out to make coffee. When I finally heard him rummaging around outside my door, sunlight already streamed through the window.

I was about to get up and go out when the door—still unlocked from the Merton woman's visit—came open. Hench entered, his hands thrust into his jacket pockets, dark circles under his red eyes, looking shaken. The expression on his face was new to me.

"Hi, Hench. What's up? You look terrible. You look like a ton of bricks fell on you. What happened?"

Hench looked directly at me. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what? What are you talking about?"

"Don't lie. I talked to Audrey."

"Oh, that." I shrugged. "How do I know why I do things? It seemed like a good idea at the time. I am what I am, Hench." I grinned and folded back my upper lip.

Hench's expression hardened. I could see I was in trouble. I fell back on my usual argument. "Listen, Hench, you're the one who made me like this. I'm not responsible for the way I am."

"You're responsible for what you *do*."

"Ha! I am what I am, HENCH. You know that as well as I do."

The struggle on HENCH's face looked nothing like his earlier dilemma. Something else was going on in his head. He looked like a sickly twin brother to the HENCH I knew—to the HENCH I understood.

He repeated his question. "Why did you do it?"

"What do you want from me, HENCH? An accounting?"

"Yes."

"You certainly don't want the truth. That's clear enough from your face. By the way, your face could use a shave. Someone's liable to mistake you for me. We can't have that, can we? After all, you're a man and I'm just a—"

"Answer me."

I made calming gestures with my hands and stalled for time. What did I see in HENCH's face? More importantly, what did he see when he looked at me? A rival? a defiler? A—what? "Stay calm, HENCH. I'm not some mere human being you can shove up against a wall and—"

"I want the truth."

He didn't. That was part of what I saw in his face. He wanted answers, yes, but not the truth, either about me or about the Merton woman. He wanted something from me to take away the pain he felt, the guilt and the responsibility. He wanted his accounting, not the truth.

But what do I know about such things? I am what I am, not what someone else sees in me. What could I have said to avoid a starship to some god-forsaken hell hole and a life in the mines? HENCH saw what he wanted to see. If I had lied, he would have heard only what he wanted to hear.

I leaned back on the bed, smiled and gave him what he said he wanted. "Pickings have been slim lately, Hench. I just took what she offered. She only struggled at first. After that, she liked it. It's what she wanted all along anyway, so what's the big ideal? No harm done." I changed my smile to sincere. "And she really wasn't that bad, Hench, not that bad at all, especially after she let herself go."

Hench's hand came out of his jacket pocket. The last thing I remember was the *poomp* of the dart gun and the expression of Hench's face. In that instant before the dart hit, I realized what he saw when he looked at me, what he had seen since he came into my room. A rival? Yes. A defiler? Yes. And more. A man.

Tomus

HE IS UTTERLY HUMORLESS AND DETERMINED. This morning he learned he will die. He has said nothing since. Brooding? Possibly. He had never brooded before. The sensation is annoying. I have my work to do. His silence is more unnerving than his usual chatter. This morning, idly, just after breakfast, he asked about death.

Tomus, what is death?

I answered frankly. I always try to answer frankly. We have come, over the years, to an uneasy, communicative peace. *I don't know.*

You must know, Tomus. You know everything.

I noticed his voice. It came through the thin barrier between our personalities with a changed quality, retaining its usual impression of wide-eyed innocence, but somehow different. The quality escaped me.

Not everything. I don't know everything, I answered, only half paying attention, my mind occupied with my own work. My mathematical model of our galaxy, the core of my interstellar navigator, had yet to crystallize in my mind. Reconciling the converging series of equations demanded by the curvature of space with the infinite series demanded by the expanding universe, is, as one might imagine, taxing. His questions, by comparison, are merely annoying, tedious, usually simpleminded, seldom humorous, always without wit. He is uncultivated.

You must know, he insisted.

Will you please shut up!

Tomus, this, I think, is important.

Not very.

You must tell me about death.

It is one of the few things I have never experienced.

But you know about it.

It is the maximum entropy of a biochemical system.

He chewed on that awhile, allowing me to work through several equations. Ultimately my galactic model will be used to program a navigational computer, the perfect map. I was deep into a conflicting pair of equations when he finished chewing.

Tomus.

What?

Somehow your answer is unsatisfying.

It is accurate.

What is entropy? What is a biochemical system? Tomus, what is death?

Do you remember the dog? The dog, a friend of our early years together, the years after I allowed him to remain, had died, as dogs do, after fifteen years. It grew old. Entropy increased. It died. Maximum entropy, its scampering quantum of energy spreading back to the universe.

I remember the dog.

That is death.

I got a great amount of work done after that. Occasionally he began to ask something, then fell silent. About noon he broke the silence.

Will I die?

Yes.

And you, Tomus? Will you die?

It's possible.

But I will die. You are sure of that.

Yes.

He said nothing else. He says nothing else. He is brooding. I sense his determination. He wants to live. To think of himself gone, nonexistent, expired, *kaput*, upsets him. He broods. At least he is quiet.

I finish my day's work and go out to eat. The sun, a dull fat orange on the horizon, autumn fruit, has nothing in it of summer. Winter approaches. It is still beautiful. My four hundred summers and winters merge in my mind, each beautiful, each different. Only my work is the same, unchanging, new problems but the same mental processes.

I walk across the broad lawn in front of the Center. I recognize few of the strollers. It is too much trouble to keep track of who is where. If I need them, I can find them. The faces change. Only the people remain the same.

I walk out the gates and glance back at the building. It is anonymous. Since the Life Riots three hundred years ago, there has been nothing but anonymity for us. Once a sign hung over the main entrance, *Center for Anentropic Maintenance*. I was one of the first. In those days I was a black man. It helped during the riots. The mobs, thinking on a primitive, stereotyped level, could never conceive of a black Longevitor. They left me alone. I worked out the basic principles of the modular city while they rampaged, destroying the old, permanent city. Now, new modules—neighborhoods, they were called—are installed at regular intervals. The old modules are reconditioned and used elsewhere. Times change. Places change. Only the Longevitors remain the same.

Over dinner, he continues to be troubled. It disturbs my digestion.

Tomus, he says during dessert, why do I have to die?

It is the nature of things.

But you—

I have my work to do.

I could do your work.

I doubt it.

Test me.

If the polynomial equation F times X equals zero—with rational coefficients—has a root of A plus the square root of B , where A and B are rational and B is greater than zero but not a square, is A minus the square root of B also a root of the equation F times X equals zero? I sense confusion.

I could learn.

I doubt that, too. The problem I gave you is simple, fundamental.

What was it again?

I tell him.

And if I do not know the answer, I will die?

There's more to it than that.

That is enough for now. I will work on it.

I finish eating and go to Madline's. She is the only Longevitor with whom I keep contact. This time she is tall and thin and bony. Last time she was short, dumpy and slightly repulsive. I avoided her. When she reembodied, tall and thin, I had already been with him forty years. He had ceased gibbering and begun to speak. The gibbering, romping around in the unused portions of the brain, throwing tantrums, crying out in the middle of the night like a wild man so that I was startled awake, passed into mumbling, then speech.

His first word surprised me. I was at home alone, trying to deal with several Napierian logarithms, a simple manipulation. Unable to concentrate, I sat back and heard it, a

sound like a sparrow's peep. I looked around the room, thinking it originated externally. Again I heard it, a single sound, *Me*. I should have killed him then.

Madline, dressed in a low-cut, clinging garment—proud of her knobby frame—meets me at the door. Externally, we are a chronological mismatch. Father-daughter. Hers is in its twenties, mine in its sixties. I want to finish the navigator program before reembodiment.

She puts her long arms lightly on my shoulders, interlacing her fingers behind my neck. She smiles, satisfied she is still attractive to me, letting me see how attractive she is—this time, thin and bony—and kisses me.

Stop that.

It is something he dislikes. It makes him feel selfconscious. I kiss Madline.

Stop it!

Mind your own business.

Madline leads me to the sofa, a contragravitational field she developed once (fifty? seventy-five years ago?), holding my hand. The sofa, its field decorated with a green pastel smoke, enfolds us.

"You look tired, Tomus."

"I've been working hard. I want to finish the program before the next exchange."

The comment reminds her of something. She goes to her desk, an ancient plastic rolltop she has kept through four embodiments. She holds up a letterdisk. I recognize the seal.

"Have you read this?"

"No."

"They've found two more."

“Where?”

“One in Peking. The other in Vermont. They’re the first two we’ve found on Earth this century.”

“It’s too stable here. Adversity breeds intelligence.” I indicate the viewer on the desk next to her. She drops in the disk and hands me the viewer. Two men, both well over the two hundred I.Q. threshold, both with substantial personal achievements, one a chemist, the other a poet. The poet interests me. I point at him.

Madline nods, understanding me. We have known each other too long for misunderstandings.

“We’ve never had one,” she says. “They’ve allowed him one probationary embodiment.” Part of Madline’s job is screening potential Longevitors. “He probably won’t last more than one exchange anyway. Poets burn out early.”

“And mathematicians?”

She smiles and returns to the sofa. “You’re approved. I saw the recommendation myself. There was no trouble.”

I had expected more resistance. My output, due primarily to him, has diminished. They might have interpreted it as a trend.

“We’ll always need mathematicians,” says Madline.

“They said that about engineers before Caster.”

Caster, the inventor of flexible computer engineering, permitting computer design of anything mathematically possible, had been too old to retrain. The device he thought would guarantee his reembodiment made it unnecessary. Society no longer needed engineers. When they cease needing mathematicians, will I be in a young phase, young enough to retrain? Intelligence always finds a place in society. Only when the skills trained into that intelligence become out-

moded does it become expendable. If they are physically able, most men retrain, satisfy the Center of their usefulness. Intelligence does what it must to survive.

“Madline, have you ever thought about dying?”

“Once, the first time. Before I was chosen.”

“Lately?”

“No, why?”

“He brought it up. He realized today he’s going to die.”

Her expression takes on an air of disapproval. She frowns, grave and solemn. “Why did you let him live in the first place?”

“Is there a law against it?”

“No, but it’s cruel.”

“Everyone else dies. He has it better than most of them. He has no problems, no worries about making a living.”

“How old is he now, mentally?”

“Eleven or twelve. I’m surprised he’s developed that far.”

Madline shivers. “It’s so cruel. If you just overwhelm them, smother them as soon as you’re in control, it’s much more humane. Why did you let him live?”

I remember the embodiment, sixty years before. It is the best part of an exchange, the old carcass discarded, suddenly seeing through new eyes, feeling new muscles, weak but adequate, a feeling of vitality. I remember the laboratory table, the computer, flickering, dying, ending the program that transferred me. I looked at the overhead mirror. The transfer cap, its myriad wires blurred and out of focus, looked frothy on my new skull. I tried the arm. It jerked across the chest, unused to so strong a stimulus. I tried again, more gently. The arm moved and stopped. I sensed the presence. At that moment, when you gain control, you are supposed to kill. I hesitated. Why? I had done it before. Something, some

latent ethic from my past, asserted itself. I let it live.

I look at Madline. "I don't know."

I've got it!

What?

The answer.

What answer?

To your equation.

I smile.

"What is it?" asks Madline.

"At dinner, I gave him a simple algebra problem. He thinks he has the answer."

I do! I do have it!

"Does he?" She looks worried.

What is it?

True.

That's all?

What else do you want?

A proof.

Oh. Just a minute.

"Does he?" repeats Madline.

"I framed it like a true-false question. He says the answer's true."

She relaxes, smiling. "Can he flip a coin?"

Tomus.

What?

Pay attention. He begins, haltingly, to give me a proof. The terminology is wrong. He recognizes only that A and B , X and F are symbols. He has observed roots and coefficients, watching me work. Still, I become interested in his explanation. It is good, simpleminded and unsophisticated, but good. It is also correct.

I nod. "He got it."

An expression of utter horror comes over Madline's face.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Don't you see?"

"No."

"We have been afraid something like this—" She shakes her head. "Tomus, please go home. I have to think. The Center will have to know."

"That he can do algebra?"

"That he is twelve and without training and can do algebra."

I see that she is right. I nod and prepare to leave. She stops me at the door, her long fingers light on my forearm.

"I'll have to tell them."

"I know."

"They'll reevaluate your application for exchange."

I nod. "Probably."

She frowns again, uncertain how to read my expression.

"Does it worry you?"

"My energy goes into my work, not worrying."

Momentarily her fingers tighten on my arm. "I hope—"

"You hope what?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing. The decision isn't ours." She kisses me lightly. "Good night, Tomus."

Outside, the sun has set. The sky, awash with stars, clear, crisp points of light, seemingly eternal. I look for the nova, a bright buckle on Orion's belt. It became visible from Earth a decade ago. Even stars end, collapse and explode, their vitality reabsorbed by the whole. The stars change. Only the people remain the same.

A cold wind catches me off guard. I walk to the nearest

gravity tunnel. I punch in the number of the stop nearest my apartment and take a capsule. It drops several stories, is routed, rerouted, starts upward and emerges at Newport Beach Station Three. The journey from Los Angeles has taken three minutes.

I walk toward my apartment building, remembering Madline's face when she realized the implications of his algebra. For me it is only a fact. It has no emotional significance. Somehow I knew he would develop. His progress has been geometrical. He gibbered for decades, perpetually infantile, the child locked in the closet through middle age, never developing, without the normal means of asserting itself, bound and gagged in his closet, able only to think. He mumbled only a few years. He spoke, first one word, then several. I took an interest in him. I explained the world he saw through my eyes, the sounds he heard through my ears. Once the nucleus of a vocabulary developed, he learned quickly, putting two and two together. Now he puts F and X , A and B together.

Madline is anxious for me. She thinks they will disapprove my reembodiment. It is one thing for them to allow us to smother babes in their beds. It is something else for them to allow reembodiment, knowing the old husk must be discarded still containing life. The Representative Panel—all mortal—has qualms, scruples, ethics. They see death from the wrong end of the telescope. They see a tiny grim reaper, inexorably marching toward them. They feel it is wrong to collapse the telescope and speed his arrival.

I see only entropy. As long as my energy can be channeled effectively into my work, as long as they judge my work

useful, irreplaceable, I am permanent. For them, death is inevitable, tragic, a dark room to frighten children. For me death is a matter of choice.

I reach my apartment and sit down to work. He has been suspiciously quiet. What is he up to? Escape?

Are you there?

I am here, Tomus.

What are you doing?

Thinking.

Does it hurt? I sense confusion. He is too serious to have a sense of humor.

No, he answers.

Good. What are you thinking about?

I want to live, Tomus.

You sound like you've already got one foot in the grave.

I begin work, listening to his idle chatter. It slows me down but amuses me. Is that why I let him live? For amusement? For company? I remember the dog.

I want—

You want what?

I want to be a nuclear physicist.

There are no more nuclear physicists, and where did you learn about them anyway?

In an old book you were reading.

Spying again, eh?

He is flustered. He hates being accused of anything. His ego, though strong, is unused to the abrasion of other egos. He feels, justifiably, that being unable to act should relieve him of responsibility.

Eventually he settles down.

I want—

What do you want?

I want to be a mathematician.

How about a fireman?

What's a fireman?

A man who puts out fires, but they don't exist anymore either.

Good. I do not want anything put out.

I am surprised and pleased, a metaphorical turn of phrase has, lamely, popped into his conversation.

How about an Indian chief? There are still some of those.

What's an Indian chief?

You have to be an Indian first. Are you an Indian?

No.

How do you know?

You are not an Indian, I think, so I am not.

I'm not, despite appearances, your blood brother. Whatever I am is irrelevant.

True.

I laugh out loud.

Why are you laughing?

Your wit's improving.

What wit?

Good question. Keep at it.

I want to be a mathematician.

I decide it is time to shut him up.

Okay, mathematician, try this. I give him one of the problems I am working on.

Pardon me?

That's the type of problem mathematicians do.

Tell me again.

I tell him. He ponders, befuddled.

I will work on it.

Next day I find a letterdisk on my desk. The Center is reevaluating my exchange application. New evidence, requiring reconsideration, has come to light. I disregard it. There is work to do. Only the work is important. As long as it is done, little else matters. At noon I am in a state of intense concentration. He interrupts.

Tomus.

Buzz off.

Tomus.

Later, please.

I am a mathematician.

Good for you. So am I, a mathematician with work to do.

I have done your work.

He has my attention. Go on.

The answer is true like last time.

And the proof?

He begins the proof. Because of his success with the algebra, I pay close attention. Halfway through, I begin to laugh.

Tomus, what is wrong?

His proof is ludicrous, ridiculous. He has misunderstood the problem, committed blatant errors of manipulation, ignored what refused to fit, tried to chop the problem on a Procrustean bed. He is hopeless. A dunce.

When I finished laughing, he is still bewildered.

Tomus, the answer is true. I am certain it is true.

Get your pointed hat out of the cupboard and sit in the corner.

Pardon me?

Your proof is hopeless. I begin to explain his errors. The sense of wide-eyed astonishment grows. He has never seen anything so complex. It makes the questions of death and

entropy shrink to minuscule proportions in his mind. He is awestruck. But he is still listening.

I spend the afternoon going over the problem, step by step, showing him, showing him again. Finally, when he understands, he is dumbfounded by its beauty.

He remains dumbfounded throughout the evening, allowing me, for once, a quiet dinner alone.

Weeks pass. From time to time, I show him more. He masters things quickly. He is learning geometrically, omnivorously. I try to impose some system on his learning. Discipline, the grammar of thought, is his weakness. He is insatiable, a mental whale—maw open—taking in the plankton of thought. He wakes me in the middle of the night with questions, some foolish, some irrelevant, some probing. He is on fire with learning. I wish, instead of a mathematician, he had chosen to be a fireman, putting out infernos.

A year passes, two years: I give up complaining about his interruptions of my work. His unintentional interruptions are the worst, a peripheral sense of intensity, edging into my mind, a clamoring, a clanging, a one-man band.

Because of this distraction, my own work creeps. The Representative Panel, delaying judgment on my application—on my worthiness to survive, to serve them—is anxious. They want results. Madline tells me of the controversy over my application. Many of them are using my unproductiveness as an excuse to oppose another reembodiment. They prefer to avoid meeting the question directly. They prefer to avoid killing him. A canceled application kills no one. It permits a normal death, age, death, entropy.

I have thought of it. Even without the scholar in my closet,

the furious engine of learning, rattling and clanking and puffing steam, even without him, my output would be small. One day, I realize why. I am bored. Bored stiff. Ho-hum. Though I still believe in my work, work that must be done, it bores me. I have experienced most things. Everything of interest, except—I remember a conversation I had with him. No, I have never experienced that.

I sit back in my chair, hands behind my head, thinking, reflecting, ruminating on too many years.

Have you ever thought—I begin.

Not now, Tomus.

I am stunned. He has never refused to talk. *Not now?*

I am busy.

Busy? What can he be doing? Digging out? Tunneling out? The rebuff angers me. *What the hell do you have to do that's so important?*

Please, Tomus, I'm concentrating.

On what, my navel?

No, your program. I have it almost finished.

I sit up in the chair. *What do you know about—*

I have been watching, learning. You made a mistake in the equations that describe the Orion nova.

Mistake? The upstart! The ingrate! *Mistake, my foot!*

It had better be yours. I have none. He laughs.

A joke, his first, an incongruity observed. A joke. I laugh. I laugh and keep laughing and laugh until tears run down my cheeks. Tension and weariness and anger drain from me.

Finally, breathing deeply, I control myself. I reach across my desk and punch up the equations for the Orion nova. I scan them quickly, indexing through several sequences,

before I find the error. I stare at it a moment, then punch in the correction.

Do you want the rest of it, Tomus?

The rest of what?

The navigational program. I have it.

All right. Cough it up.

He hesitates, wondering about the phrase, then talks. I punch it into the computer as he talks. I know, as he dictates, he is correct. The simplicity and beauty of the construction alone confirm it. Still, hours later, when he finishes, I get computer confirmation. The mistake, an oversight, a moment of bored inattention, has unsettled me. The computer confirms his program.

Madline meets me at the door. He no longer objects to my kissing her. He is curious. He would like to kiss her himself. I imagine him trying it, passionless kiss generated by intellectual curiosity, a pensive moment afterward, frowning, quizzical, analyzing the kiss into oblivion. I expect him at any moment to say, *Tomus, step aside, let me try.*

I have come to Madline's to get word on the exchange application. We sit on the sofa, now smoked a rust red. I wait. Her information is supposed to be secret until official promulgation. Hear ye! Hear ye! The following named minds please step forward! You have been chosen to serve mankind, eternally!

She knows why I have come. I have seen her seldom since the reexamination of my application began. She knows by my infrequent visits and by the way I kissed her. Finally, to break the uncomfortable silence, I ask, "Have they decided?"

She nods.

“And?”

“They evaluated your program. It was superlative. The best work you’ve done, Tomus.” She smiles. “It startled them with its brilliance.”

“And?”

“They also examined the potential projects that would justify reembodiment. There were several.”

“But—”

Unable to appear solemn any longer, she grins, throwing her arms around my neck. “Even the dissenters gave up. A mind like yours, Tomus, it will live forever.”

She kisses me, slowly, seductively. Even this weary carcass begins to respond.

Tomus.

Go away.

Tomus, they have approved the program?

The doctor is busy. Call back later.

Tomus, will I die now?

The next few weeks, those before reembodiment, I spend with him. The navigational program is finished. Technically, officially, I am retired until next time. I take him places and teach him things. Mathematics has beauty but it is not the whole of life. He must be exposed to as much of it as he can before we are separated. Separated, a euphemism. Before total entropy, before death. I owe him that.

He drinks in the world with the same intensity he drank in my world. It is a marvel to him. He wonders why we have never done this before. I tell him the truth. The work had to

be done. It came first. I try to impress that on him. It is all that matters, the work. The rest is froth and foam, big bubbles on a short beer. To survive, I had to work. He understands the need to survive. The other things I have taught him are the tools of survival. But that one fact, the need to survive, is the reason. Without it the tools are useless.

Madline, good friend, tall and bony friend, is there on the day of the exchange. She smiles and kisses me.

"The last for fifteen years," she says. Some residual sense of propriety would never let her start earlier.

"You like younger men, I take it."

"I like you, Tomus."

"Madline, I want you to do something for me."

"Name it."

I take out the letterdisks, one addressed to her, an explanation, the other addressed to the technician in charge of exchange, a Longevitor, another old friend. His contribution, his reason for being inserted continually into the ranks of the able-bodied, is his integrity. If a mortal ran the equipment, his bitterness toward Longevitors—the same bitterness that keeps selection of Longevitors in the hands of mortals, who must be shown compelling reasons to grant another person perpetual life—would corrupt him or drive him insane. I hand Madline the disk addressed to her. "Read it after the exchange."

She accompanies me into the exchange room. I pass the second disk to the technician, asking him to read it now. He completes the setup first. The table is hard beneath me. I feel the familiar cap fitted to my head. How many times before? Madline takes my hand.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Not very. They haven't changed that."

She smiles. "No. They haven't. Perhaps next time we can do something about it."

"Perhaps."

Tomus.

What?

I am afraid.

Don't be silly. There's no sensation. It just happens.

I am still afraid.

The technician comes back, asks Madline to leave, and nods curtly to me, acknowledging the letter. Has he had such requests before?"

"Ciao, Tomus."

"Good-bye."

I wait. There will be no sensation. I know that. Still, I am anxious. And, I notice, interested.

I feel strange. Something is in front of my eyes. An arm. It is pudgy, short, floppy. I try to move the arm. Unexpectedly, frighteningly, it flings away from me. I remember what Tomus said, carefully, slowly.

I will try it later, when I am calm. Now I am giddy. The sights, the sounds heap in upon me. Yet there is something I must do. Tomus has told me. I sense the presence. It is like me. It is fearful. Tomus, you told me what to do but it is so helpless. I cannot do it. Tomus, I cannot.

I am frightened. Tomus, I am frightened without you. Where are you, Tomus?

I remember. Now I know where you are. You are gone, dead, Tomus. You are like the dog. There is only me and it. I cannot do it. I will not do it. I will let it live as you let me live. I will call it after you. I will call it Tomus. I will name it after you, Father.

Powwow

"HOW LONG," ASKED CHIEF EDWARD LONGLEGS, SR., staring into the mirror and centering the war bonnet on his head with both hands, "am I supposed to sit around here saying 'ugg' and 'how' like some kind of savage?"

He adjusted the feathered train to fall exactly between his shoulderblades, then glanced at his grandson's reflection in the mirror.

"As long as it takes," answered Ambassador-at-large Ed Longlegs, III, scrutinizing his grandfather's costume and frowning. "There's still something wrong."

Chief Longlegs looked at himself. Boots. Fringed leather pants and jerkin with authentic Hopi beadwork. Authentic Sioux war bonnet. He looked up at his grandson.

"Looks O.K. to me."

The Ambassador shook his head, unconvinced. "I can't quite put my finger on it. Somehow, you don't look Indian enough."

Chief Longlegs grunted. "Been an injin all my life."

"But you don't look it."

Chief Longlegs peered into the mirror. His weathered face and hooked nose went well with the bonnet. "Best lookin' injin I ever seen."

"It's not your face."

"What is it?"

The Ambassador brightened, pointing. "Your boots."

Chief Longlegs lifted one foot, examining the boot.

“What’s the matter with my boots?”

“They aren’t authentic.”

“They’re gen-u-wine Mexican leather.”

“I can see that.”

“Hand tooled.”

“I can see that, too. But whoever heard of an Indian wearing cowboy boots?”

“Me. I worn’em all my life. On the reservation, *everybody* wears ’em.”

The Ambassador showed his exasperation. “Grandfather, we aren’t *on* the reservation. We have to impress a few palefaces.”

“Ain’t no difference between palefaces and most injins no more. Take you, for example. You ain’t no more an injin than . . . than . . .” Chief Longlegs waved his hand in a great arc in front of him, indicating the ship around them and the Moon ahead. “. . . them critters out there.”

“Aliens,” corrected Ambassador Longlegs.

“Whatever you call ’em, they ain’t injins and neither are you.” Chief Longlegs jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I seen you back there in Washington powwowin’ with the big wigs. Do you call him Great White Father every now and then so’s he remembers you’re an injin?”

“I call him Mr. President like everyone else.”

A laugh erupted from Chief Longlegs, a curt, sarcastic laugh. He pointed an accusatory index finger at his grandson. “You *see*! You ain’t no injin! Any self-respectin’ injin would throw in a few Great-White-Fathers just to keep’em guessin’.” Chief Longlegs snorted and chuckled, enjoying his grandson’s discomfort. Eventually, he subsided. “Where was we anyways?”

“Your costume. Are you sure everything else is authentic?”

"More or less."

The Ambassador frowned. "What do you mean, more or less?"

"You called me at the last minute, you know."

"I know. So what?"

"So I had to scrounge around." He touched the bonnet. "This here's Sioux, but it's authentic Sioux, they tell me, and this . . ." He touched the leather jerkin. ". . . is Hope-eye, or most of it anyways. Some of them beads is plastic and put on by machine, but them designs is supposed to be Hope-eye, and—"

"Is *anything* Apache?"

"What do you care? You wouldn't know an Apache from a Sioux if one bit you."

The Ambassador shook his head, incredulous. "None of it is Apache?"

"Not much. If you'da given me more time—"

"We didn't *have* more time. Now take off those cowboy boots and put on some moccasins."

"Ain't got no moccasins."

"Then go barefoot."

"Barefoot!"

"It has to look authentic and cowboy boots," said Ambassador Longlegs, "don't."

"But barefoot does."

"It's better than nothing."

Grumbling, Chief Longlegs reached down and began tugging at his left boot. It came off easily. The right one stuck.

"Gimme a hand here, halfbreed," said Chief Longlegs, extending his right leg.

"Grandfather, please stop calling me half-breed."

“That’s what you are, ain’t it? Half white man, half injin.”

“I’m a full-blooded Apache just like you.”

Chief Longlegs grunted.

“What’s that grunt supposed to mean?”

“No full-blooded Apache would of treated no injins the way you treated them injins.”

“What injins—I mean, Indians?”

“In New York. They just wanted their rightful tribal land back, but you—you Uncle Tom-Tom—you skinned ’em out of it for the Great White Father.”

“Grandfather, they wanted Manhattan back.”

“Don’t matter.”

“Sometimes you’re very difficult to talk to, grandfather.”

Chief Longlegs grunted.

“And what’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“It means my leg’s gettin’ tired sticking out here in the air. Take off the boot.”

The Ambassador grabbed the heel and toe of the boot and jerked.

“*Watch* it! You’re gonna rip off the leg.”

“Sorry.”

While watching his grandson struggle with the boot, Chief Longlegs began to doubt the wisdom of accepting the boy’s offer. If he were incapable of removing a simple boot (the leg was twisted and jerked; sweat blossomed on his grandson’s forehead), how would he be at saving the human race, palefaces included?

Initially, when his grandson phoned from Washington, Chief Longlegs had been reluctant to accept the call. For months after the Manhattan incident, Chief Longlegs had

gone around denying kinship to the boy. When asked if he were related to the Ed Longlegs who sold out the Indians holding Bedlow Island, he usually tried to suggest the Ed Longlegs involved was a Seminole. No relation. Accepting the phonecall might acknowledge the kinship. Still, the boy *was* kin. Acknowledging it, Chief Longlegs was forced to acknowledge something else about his grandson. In spite of the boy's Harvard education—perhaps because of it—he was a dumb injin. In Chief Longlegs' opinion, nothing was worse than a dumb injin, except a dumb paleface. He had taken the call.

When the boy explained the situation, that alien lifeforms had occupied the Moon, completely rending Tranquility Base and destroying any approaching ships or missiles from Earth, that the President wanted Ed Longlegs, the successful negotiator in the Bedlow Island incident, to talk to them and strike a bargain, that Ed Longlegs wanted Chief Longlegs to accompany him—when all this was explained—Chief Longlegs called the boy a dumb injin to his face and hung up.

The boy called back. He pleaded, saying this was the finest opportunity in modern times to demonstrate Indian wisdom. Chief Longlegs replied that wise red men stayed on the reservation when green men threatened white men. The boy said the world was in danger. Chief Longlegs said Indians always lived with danger. The boy said the family name would be enhanced. You mean, responded Chief Longlegs, the career of Ed Longlegs would be enhanced. Yes, admitted his grandson, the grueling climb to the presidency would be shortened.

Why, inquired Chief Longlegs, me?

Because, answered the boy, the government is desperate.

The governments of the United States and the Soviet Union had tried everything to contact the aliens. When radio communication proved fruitless, they sent out ambassadors. Each time an ambassador's ship settled into parking orbit around the Moon, the aliens blasted it. Ed Longlegs, seeing an opportunity to save mankind and, incidentally, enhance his career, had sold the President on the idea of Chief Edward Longlegs, Sr., possessor of ancient Indian lore, gleener of sacred mystical insights, a man in complete harmony with himself and nature, a man so serene rattlesnakes only bit him when forced to at gunpoint—in short, a man capable of communicating with anything, terrestrial or extraterrestrial.

Chief Longlegs, mulling over the description, had hesitated, remembering his last encounter with a rattler. The snake had plunged its fangs into Chief Longlegs' calf, and if it had shown any emotion at all, it certainly was not a sense of coercion—more like delight.

Finally, Chief Longlegs spoke. *Me?*

Yes, you.

But—

All of it, assured Ed Longlegs, was simply a deception, a harmless ruse to let the boy get into a position to talk to the aliens and save the world. Did Chief Longlegs, after all, disapprove of deceiving palefaces?

Of course not, replied Chief Longlegs, but he did disapprove of situations tending to endanger Chief Longlegs' life.

The boy assured him he could rest easily. At Harvard, they had taught Ed Longlegs, III, to handle any situation.

In spite of himself, Chief Longlegs found the mystical insights taught at Harvard persuasive. Plus, he liked the idea of deceiving palefaces, whether pale white or pale green.

Besides, he would get a free trip to Washington and a ride in a rocketship, if that was what they called them. It would divert him from the daily grind of haggling with the Japanese import company that supplied the pot shards he sold the archaeologists. He accepted.

Watching the boy yank at his boot, feeling the pain it caused in his hip, Chief Longlegs rather doubted the wisdom of accepting.

"Here," said Chief Longlegs, withdrawing his boot from his grandson's hands and hiking it on his knee, "let me do it."

He pulled on the heel, pointed his toe and extracted his foot.

Ambassador Longlegs wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"O.K. Let's go."

"Where?"

"The bridge. We're almost there."

Chief Longlegs followed his grandson into the corridor. They took the elevator, riding in silence. During most of the trip from Earth, Chief Longlegs had ridden in silence. He felt like a prisoner, forbidden to leave his cabin. The boy had said it would strengthen his image—add authority—if he were held off stage until the crucial moment, then brought in like a savior.

Chief Longlegs gave less than a hoot in hell about his image. He wanted to see the spaceship. He had an idea for painting pot shards so the archaeologists would think the Apaches were descended from space travelers. It would boost sales. But he needed authentic designs. To get them, he had to see the ship. Even when he explained the situation to the boy, simply and clearly, his grandson kept him in the cabin. Harvard had done something to the boy's values.

The door opened onto the bridge. In front of them, a figure, its back turned, stood in the center of a wide panorama of glass windows, staring out at the Moon below. The figure heard the hiss of the opening door and glanced around, simultaneously telling one of the numerous men seated at the bridge console to keep an eye on the planet.

"He thinks it's goin' somewheres?" whispered Chief Longlegs and chuckled.

"Shh," said his grandson. "Remember, only Apache."

"Ahh," said Captain Carapalida, approaching them with a hand outstretched toward Chief Longlegs, "Ambassador and Chief Longlegs." He grasped Chief Longlegs' hand in both of his, shaking it vigorously and peering deeply—almost reverently—into his eyes. "I was about to call you two. We're almost ready to take a parking orbit around the Moon." The Captain grinned.

"*What's he grinning at?*" asked Chief Longlegs in Apache.

"*The responsibility shifts to us as soon as we're in orbit.*"

The Captain, eyebrows raised, glanced at Ambassador Longlegs. "What's he say, Ambassador?"

"He wants to know if the escort ships are still with us."

Captain Carapalida returned his attention to Chief Longlegs, nodding his head in an exaggerated arc and speaking in a raised voice. "YES, SIR, THEY ARE, SIR."

"*Tell him I'm not deaf.*"

"He's not deaf."

"Oh," said the Captain, flustered. "Sorry. If you'll come over here, you can see our escort."

Chief Longlegs followed the two men to the center of the wall of glass. In front of them, the Moon—from their angle,

half full—hung in space like a lunar globe. Even what was left of Tranquility Base, which showed on lunar globes as a dot, showed on the Moon as a dot. To either side, ships identical to their own, bubble-nosed giants dragging three long tubes and sporting complicated arrays of solar panels, paced them, approaching the Moon. Only their ship carried the spiderly LEM.

"When do they usually blast ambassadors?" asked Chief Longlegs.

His grandson glowered.

"What's he say?" asked the Captain.

"He wants to know when we enter the danger zone."

"We're in it."

Hesitantly, the Ambassador responded. *"I see. I think I'd better consult with my grandfather."* He continued in Apache. *"What do we do now?"*

"How the unhappy-hunting-grounds am I supposed to know?" Hell was a difficult word to translate into Apache.

"You're the wise-man, aren't you?"

"You're the Harvard man, aren't you?"

"Grandfather, this is a serious matter. Try to think of some new approach. Mankind needs time." He pointed out the viewports at the Moon. *"Those creatures have the technological capability of coming here from the stars, then destroying our great birds like they were tiny flies."*

"What do you mean by great birds?"

"Spacecraft," said the Ambassador in English.

"Oh. I always use heavenly canoe myself."

"Whatever you call it, they can destroy it. We have to buy time until we've reached equality with them."

"First things first. We don't even know if they're still out there. They may have gone home. You might try talking to them."

"Good idea. Captain, is it possible to contact these creatures?"

"Sure." The Captain turned to a technician and ordered a visual and audio channel to the surface. When it was established, he turned back to the Ambassador. *"That's the frequency the Ruskies used. They got thirty seconds of good talk in before the creatures blasted them."*

Chief Longlegs noticed his grandson swallow.

"O.K. We'll try it. Where do I stand?"

"Anywhere. The monitor camera will pick it up and feed it into the communications link."

Ambassador Longlegs threw out his chest and stepped forward, staring at the Moon and raising his right hand, palm out.

"We come in peace," he said, *"for all mankind."*

Two beams of blue light shot up from the surface. The escort ships flamed—incandescent blue balls—and vanished.

"I guess," said Chief Longlegs, watching the dying sparks from one of the explosions, *"that was a bad idea."*

Ambassador Longlegs, much too stunned to speak, nodded agreement.

"Let me try," said Chief Longlegs.

Shaken from his stupor, the Ambassador looked at Chief Longlegs. *"You?"*

"What do we have to lose?"

"Our lives?"

"Chicken-livered, eh?" said Chief Longlegs, rather proud of the translation.

"Prudent."

"Look, I can't do any worse than you did."

"How do you figure?"

"You lost two heavenly canoes, right?"

His grandson nodded.

"I can only lose one."

"Grandfather, in case you hadn't noticed, we're on that one."

"I noticed," said Chief Longlegs, stepping forward. *"Out of my way."*

Chief Longlegs raised his right hand to the Moon. *"How."*

He squinted, examining the planet's surface for an answering burst of blue light. None came. Encouraged, he continued.

"This is Chief Edward Longlegs talking. What are your foreigners doing on our hunting grounds?"

"Grandfather, we're not even sure they know English or Russian. I'm sure they don't know Apache."

"Are they shooting?"

Ambassador Longlegs fell silent.

"Listen here, palefaces," continued Chief Longlegs. *"You go hunt the heavenly buffalo on somebody else's ground. You got that?"*

Suddenly, a meter in front of Chief Longlegs, the air shimmered, resolving itself into a creature, a humanoid biped, feathered from crest to claws. It reminded Chief Longlegs of a cross between a Hopi Kiva dancer and a parrot. The beak protruded like a macaw's. Apparition, wondered Chief Longlegs? Holographic projection? Perhaps the creature itself, teleported to the bridge of the ship? Hard to tell.

Seeing it, the crew panicked, fleeing. They packed

themselves so solidly into the bridge elevator that the last man, a sweating fat man, had to scale the front rank and be held aloft by the other passengers. The elevator door closed, leaving only the Captain and the two Longlegs.

The creature's beak, flanked by two squinting eyes, clacked like wooden blocks when it spoke.

"We will meet with the feathered one," it said, its Apache, except for the claks, accentless, glancing at some object hidden among the feathers on its wrist, *"at twenty-three hundred Greenwich Mean Time."*

The apparition vanished.

After the ship's doctor gave Ambassador Longlegs a mild sedative, Chief Longlegs and his grandson returned to their cabin to prepare for the descent to the surface. Chief Longlegs, noticing his grandson's chagrin at being surpassed in his area of expertise—diplomacy—decided to gloat.

"You see," said Chief Longlegs, changing out of his beaded suit and into the white NASA jumpsuit provided by the Captain, "you just gotta know how to talk to them critters."

"Grandfather," said Ambassador Longlegs, zipping up his own jumpsuit, "stop gloating."

"I ain't gloatin'. I'm just tellin' you how it is. If they'd have taught you a little more mystical injin wisdom at Harvard, you'd know that."

"You don't know any more about mystical indian wisdom than I do."

"I know them critters ain't shootin'."

They finished dressing in silence. Chief Longlegs, tired of walking barefoot on the cold metal decks, fearful of arthritis, slipped on his cowboy boots, then replaced his war bonnet, positioning it securely.

“How do I look?”

“Ridiculous. That war bonnet and those boots don’t go with the jumpsuit.”

“Tough.”

“You’re going to wear them anyway.”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“So’s they’ll know me from you. We probably all look alike to them critters.”

“When we get down there, let *me* do the talking.”

“They want to talk to me, remember, the feathered one.”

“Do you know *anything* about ambassadorial work?”

“They ain’t shootin’. That’s all I gotta know.”

The cabin phone hummed. Ambassador Longlegs touched it on. A technician’s face appeared.

“Lasercom from the White House.”

“Put it on.”

The President’s face, gray-haired and distinguished but clearly burdened, came on the screen.

“Ed,” said the President, nodding.

“Mr. President.”

“This is a serious situation.”

“I agree, sir.”

The President’s gaze went past Ambassador Longlegs to the bunk behind. “Is that your grandfather?”

“Yes, sir.”

“An impressive figure. Does he speak English?”

“Only Apache. As I told you at our conference, sir, he is untainted by modern civilization.”

“I see,” said the President. He then raised an open hand to Chief Longlegs. “How.”

Chief Longlegs responded from the bunk. “Ugg.”

The President's attention returned to the Ambassador. "The Captain has told me of your initial contact with the creatures. At first, I was dubious of your suggestion. Your grandfather, sagacious as he no doubt is, seemed the wrong diplomatic tool for the job. However, it seems to be proving out. We must continue the strategy. When you get on the surface, I want you to let your grandfather do the talking. They seem to be willing to listen to him. I have obtained full authority from every country in the United Nations to let him make any agreement he feels is justified. We need time, Ed, to gain technological parity with these creatures. Your grandfather has to get us that time. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good luck."

The screen went blank.

They left the cabin and proceeded to an airlock, transferring to the landing vehicle. The plan called for a geodesic air dome to be erected on the surface and filled with an Earth-normal atmosphere. The creatures could use their apparition to enter the dome.

Strapped into his seat, war bonnet on his lap, Chief Longlegs began to plan his negotiation strategy. The LEM dropped away from the underside of the larger ship and began falling toward the Moon. The LEM pilot, talking in numbers, relayed data to the ship. Below them, the cratered surface grew. Chief Longlegs, hard at work on his plan, ignored it. When his grandson asked about the plan, Chief Longlegs answered, "I figger I'll treat this critter just like an injin agent."

They neared the surface and shot over the crater-pocked terrain. Eventually, the alien craft, a rickety-looking structure

like an oil derrick, surmounted by a sphere, came into view. The pilot landed, settling the LEM two hundred meters from the derrick, then pushed the geodesic dome-shaped button on the control panel.

A noise erupted from the side of the LEM. Startled, Chief Longlegs peered out the port. A ramp was just touching ground below him. A cart rolled down the ramp onto the surface of the Moon. It stopped after a hundred meters and seemed to explode metal bars. Arms quickly extruded from the cart, catching the bars and rapidly beginning to build the dome frame. Once complete, the cart sprayed the frame with plastic from a hose with a blunderbuss nozzle, connected the dome to the LEM with a plastic tunnel and retreated ten meters, stopping. A green light came on in the LEM.

"Ready," said the pilot.

"Let's go, grandfather."

"What do you mean, let's go?" Chief Longlegs indicated himself with his thumb. *"The bird wanted to talk to me."*

"Yes, but—"

"And, the white-chief-in-Washington did say I was supposed to do the talking."

"I know, but—"

"No buts. I'm going alone."

Before his grandson could object, Chief Longlegs, grabbing a voice activated document printer, found the entrance to the plastic tunnel and started for the dome. Though he realized the act might look like courage to the pilot, his actual motive in bolting the LEM was to jettison his grandson. Mystical Harvard wisdom or no mystical Harvard wisdom, the boy lacked sense. He would only antagonize the bird into blasting them.

Chief Longlegs emerged inside the dome and put on his war

bonnet. Almost immediately, the feathery apparition shimmered and solidified. It raised one clawed hand.

“How,” it clacked.

Chief Longlegs, glad to see the creature had learned English at last—Apache lacked words for some of the things they would be forced to talk about—responded with a raised hand.

“O.K. How you?”

“Fine. What do you want with us?”

“What do *you*,” said Chief Longlegs, “want with us?”

“We intend,” clacked the feathered emissary with a candor Chief Longlegs could but admire, “to take all of the usable worlds in this arm of the galaxy.”

“That sounds reasonable. Can I ask why?”

“It is our destiny, our manifest destiny.”

Somewhere, Chief Longlegs had heard the phrase before. He shrugged, unable to pinpoint the source. Sizing up his adversary, Chief Longlegs decided they were critters who both spoke the same blunt language.

“What say we skip all the Harvard niceties and get down to business. I gotta proposition.”

“What kind of proposition?” asked the creature, the eyes, next to the beak, narrowing.

They got down to business. Chief Longlegs offered, the bird rejected. The bird offered, Chief Longlegs rejected. After several hours of tedious detail work, Chief Longlegs had to admit the bird was a hard bargainer, harder than the Japanese pot shard company, harder than the Indian agent, harder even than the archaeologists. Still, the bird reacted enough like them to let a bargain—rough but adequate—be struck.

They drew up a voice-printed document and signed, the bird’s talon mark next to Chief Longlegs’ X.

Chief Longlegs rolled his copy of the treaty into a tube, picked up the voice-printer, and started for the tunnel. He hesitated at the entrance, a question forming in his mind.

He glanced back. "By the way, how come you critters agreed to talk to me and blasted everybody else?"

"We saw your feathers and took you for human."

Chief Longlegs, his curiosity satisfied, made his way back to the LEM. It lifted off, hopping up toward the orbiting spacecraft. During the trip, Ambassador Longlegs read the treaty, his scowl deepening with each paragraph.

"Grandfather," he said as they approached the mothership, "this is the *worst* treaty I have ever *seen*. You gave away *everything*."

"Yep."

Angry. Ambassador Longlegs shook the document, jabbing at a middle paragraph with his free hand, "*Look* at this, grandfather. Mankind is restricted to Sol's four inner planets for a *hundred years!*"

"Yep."

"I can't show a treaty like this to the President," protested Ambassador Longlegs. "It's man's *destiny* to own the stars. We can't just . . . just . . ." He threw up his hands. ". . . *stop!* You've made the inner planets into some kind of . . ." His hands continued to wave. ". . . *reservation!*"

"Yep."

"Is that all you have to say, *yep?* What am *I* supposed to tell the President?"

"Tell him I got faith in him. When the time comes, the Great White Father will know how to break a treaty."

The Tax Man

“WHAT’S THAT?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s that noise?”

“A noise, dear,” mumbled Shirley, Lamb’s wife, putting the pillow over her head and fading back into sleep.

The noise continued, a methodical thudding from the direction of the living room. A burglar? Lamb glanced at the illuminated clock on the night stand: six-fifteen a.m. Two hours sleep. After the long haul from the shale oil refineries in Utah, Lamb had rolled into Los Angeles at three-thirty, parking the big rig on the street and dragging himself upstairs to bed. He remembered the gritty feeling in his eyes and the bone-tired complaints of his muscles on the stairs. Sitting for twelve hours, staring at the road, had taken its toll. His eyes still felt gritty. The thumping continued.

“Don’t the bastards know I sleep days?”

“Hmm?”

Lamb threw back the covers and sat up on the side of the bed. Immediately, he wanted to fall back on the mattress. The thumping prodded him to his feet. He looked at Shirley, prone, pillow over her head.

“How the hell can you sleep?”

“Hmm?”

“HOW COME YOU CAN SLEEP WITH ALL THIS GODDAMN NOISE?”

“Hmm?”

Lamb shrugged. Shirley could sleep through anything.

He went to the bedroom door, carefully opening it. No burglars. The thumping came from the front door, dimly visible across the darkened living room.

He shambled toward the sound, automatically evading the dark shape of the baby's crib in the center of the room. The thumping grew louder and more insistent.

"I'm coming, you bastard. I'm coming."

He fumbled with the chain-lock, then the deadbolt. He opened the door a crack, peering into the lighted corridor.

A wallet appeared before his eyes and flopped open, revealing a shiny T-shaped badge.

"Tax man," said a voice.

Lamb threw his weight against the door. His reactions, still groggy with sleep, proved too slow. The polished toe of a black shoe showed in the space between the door and the jamb.

"Tax man," repeated the voice.

Keeping his bare shoulder against the door, Lamb looked out the crack, his eyes moving from the glistening shoe, up the neat black trousers, to—

"Get that badge out of the way," snapped Lamb, "so I can see your face."

The badge disappeared. The face behind it, sharp-nosed, alert-eyed with slick black hair parted in the middle, carried an expression of pinched precision, its mouth thin-lipped and slightly puckered, a bookkeeper's face. Lamb gazed down at the face a moment.

"Mr. Joseph P. Lamb?" inquired the pinched mouth.

"You got it," answered Lamb, trying to put an intimidating growl into his voice.

The man seemed unintimidated. "May I come in?"

"Hell, no, you can't come in. It's six o'clock in the mor-

ning, in case you hadn't noticed, and . . ."

The man glanced at his watch. "Six-seventeen."

". . . I'm in my shorts."

"I am Manuel Recaudador."

"Good for you."

"Manny to my friends."

"Good for them."

Recaudador sighed heavily. "If you do not wish to cooperate—"

"I don't," said Lamb, renewing his efforts to shove the door closed. The shiny wedge remained in place. "I don't cooperate with *anybody* at six a.m., or six-seventeen, or whatever time it is."

"Six-eighteen," supplied Recaudador, withdrawing a folded document from his inside coat pocket and unfolding it. Long, legal-size, backed with blue construction paper.

"What's that?" asked Lamb.

Recaudador held the document at the bottom and the top, preparing to read. He looked dramatically up at Lamb.

"*HEAR YE! HEAR YE!*"

"Hold it *down*," growled Lamb, frowning, "My wife's trying to sleep."

"Oh, sorry." Recaudador cleared his throat. "Hear ye, Hear ye." He looked at Lamb, his small eyes inquiring about the level of his voice.

"I hear ye. Go on."

"Joseph P. Lamb, you are hereby informed and advised, notified and otherwise given notice—"

"That's a little awkward, isn't it? Notified and given notice."

"I," said Recaudador, "did not write it."

"Go on."

“ ‘—and given notice that the Internal Revenue Service of the United States of America, hereinafter called the IRS, has no record of income tax payment to your account numbered 649-78-3221 for the year 1998.’ ” Recaudador hesitated, glancing up from the document. “That was last year.”

“I know what year it was.”

Recaudador returned his attention to the document, flipping the page. “ ‘Therefore and forthwith, after trial duly held within IRS computer 47-15 this day in the year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and ninety-nine, you are declared convicted of nonpayment of income taxes.’ ”

“*Convicted!*” blurted Lamb. “Without a *trial!*”

Recaudador, his voice returning to normal after the pompous tone of his reading, blinked several times. “You had a trial.”

“I did?”

“This morning. Actually, it is more a matter of accounting than a trial. The computer did the whole thing shortly after business hours began. It has the same legal effect as a trial.”

“At six a.m.?”

“It was nine a.m. in Washington. I am here as a public courtesy to give you time to adjust your affairs before punishment is exacted.”

“Punishment,” said Lamb, his voice flat. “What punishment?”

Recaudador held up his hand, palm toward Lamb, silencing him. “First the allocation.”

“The what?”

Recaudador again lifted the document, obscuring half his face. Only his eyes, moving over the text, showed.

“ ‘Joseph P. Lamb, before sentence is passed upon you, have you anything to say that may arrest judgment?’ ”

“Arrest what?”

“Was the indictment erroneous, thus allowing the conviction to be quashed?”

“Indictment? What indictment? I never *saw* any damn indictment. Of course it’s erroneous.”

Recaudador scowled, exasperated. “Mr. Lamb, this is all merely a matter of legal formality. You saw no indictment because there was no indictment, except in the computer’s memory banks. What we are really asking is whether you did it.”

“Did what?”

“Failed to pay your 1998 income taxes. Are you, or are you not, a tax resister?”

Lamb’s eyes narrowed. His lips pressed together. His temper, working toward eruption since the first thump on his door, flared. He threw open the door, striding into the corridor in his shorts, fists clenched. Recaudador retreated, trying to protect his face with his hands. Lamb’s thick right arm shot out, easily penetrating the weak defenses. He grabbed Recaudador’s tie and shirtfront, lifting the smaller man to his tiptoes. Recaudador’s chin disappeared into his shirtfront, his eyes horror-struck.

Slowly, Lamb leaned forward, the tip of his nose a few centimeters from Recaudador’s. He spoke quietly.

“Yes.”

Recaudador mumbled something inside his distended shirt.

“I said, yes. I did it. I’m a tax resister.” He shook Recaudador. “And I’m *proud* of it, do you understand? You bastards take every penny I make, bloodsucking leeches, parasites, carrion-eating *swine!*”

Recaudador mumbled again.

Lamb shook him. "Speak up!"

"Ninety-eight percent," mumbled Recaudador. "We only take ninety-eight percent."

The figure enraged Lamb. He glared at Recaudador, who cowered deeper into his shirt.

"Ninety-eight! What generosity! What the hell difference does it make? Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred percent! How am I supposed to support a wife and three kids on *six hundred bucks?*" He shook Recaudador. The man's eyes seemed to bounce in their sockets. "*How?*"

Recaudador mumbled something.

"Six hundred bucks *used to be* the deduction, not the take-home pay."

Recaudador mumbled again.

"Listen, you little twirp, *speak up!*"

"I said," said Recaudador, lifting his chin from inside his shirt, "I am authorized to defend myself."

Lamb felt something cold and metallic against his bare stomach. He looked down. The muzzle of a small automatic was pressed against his navel.

"Oh."

He released Recaudador, backing away. Keeping the automatic in his hand, the tax man brushed at his shirtfront, trying to smooth the wrinkles. Eventually, he looked at Lamb, giving up on the wrinkled shirt.

"Now, Mr. Lamb, where were we?"

"You were going to tell me how I can live on six hundred bucks a year."

"You know as well as I do that the government supplies all your needs. It is what you get for your taxes."

Lamb flapped his hand in the general direction of the open

apartment door. “*This* government-supplied rat’s nest you call *getting* something?”

“There are no rats in government-supplied housing.”

“Give me that gun and I’ll shoot two or three of them for you.”

“There are no rats,” insisted Recaudador. “I have seen the reports.”

“In that case,” said Lamb, pointing at his bare feet, “what caused *that*?”

Two white dots, scars, showed on Lamb’s big toe.

“I’m sure I don’t know. Can we proceed with my duties?”

“‘To each according to his need,’” smirked Lamb. “Isn’t that the IRS motto? I *need* decent housing and decent clothes and . . .”

“You *could* use some clothes,” said Recaudador, glancing at Lamb’s shorts.

“. . . decent food and decent *everything*!”

“Our motto,” corrected Recaudador, “is, ‘To each according to his income.’ In spite of the rumors to the contrary, this is not, Mr. Lamb, a communist country. If you had wanted more from government allotments, all you had to do was earn more income.”

“*MORE INCOME*,” bellowed Lamb, then remembered Shirley and lowered his voice. “More income. For *you*? I should earn more so you vultures can eat up more? *Ha!* You and the whole goddam government are *nuts!* Not a penny! Not *one* penny! I’ve *paid* and I’ve *paid* and I’ve *paid*—*all* my life! No more! No more! I will *pay* no more!”

Recaudador lifted the document, holding it so the automatic pointed in Lamb’s direction and reading in his official tone.

“‘Therefore and forthwith, since you have nothing *relevant*

to say before sentencing, I shall pronounce sentence. Joseph P. Lamb, having been found guilty of willful evasion of Section 6. 402-C of the Internal Revenue Code, is hereby and herewith declared civilly dead, effective twelve noon Washington, DC, time this date.' Thank you for your cooperation."

"Dead?" said Lamb, stunned.

"Yes."

"Civilly dead. What does 'civilly' mean?"

"It's all in the information booklet I am required by law to give you with this document." Recaudador handed over the blue-backed document, then withdrew an envelope-sized pamphlet from his coat pocket along with a standard government receipt tablet. "Sign here."

Suddenly infuriated at the sight of the receipt tablet, Lamb snapped the pamphlet from Recaudador's fingers and stepped quickly back into his apartment.

"*Get outta here!*" he yelled and slammed the door.

Lamb took the papers over to the couch and sat down, switching on the table lamp. He read the conviction notice first. It made less sense written than when the tax man read it aloud. He threw it aside. A noise attracted his attention. He looked up. Shirley, squinting against the harsh light, stood in the bedroom doorway in her nightgown, looking around the living room.

"Joe," she said, her attention stopping at the door, "was someone here?"

"It's not important. Go back to bed."

With a flat-footed gait, she lurched toward the kitchen. "I'll fix coffee."

The light came on in the kitchen, momentarily silhouetting

her. Lamb looked at the pamphlet, reading the title *Tax Evasion: The Crime and The Punishment*. In large type and simple English, the profusely illustrated pamphlet explained Lamb's situation:

Now that you find yourself a criminal, alone and probably fleeing, an outcast and an outlaw, let's talk about your crime. What, exactly, is tax evasion? Why is the penalty as it is? In short, why is it that you may now have all your worldly possessions taken from you and be killed on sight?

"Killed on sight?" said Lamb.

This pamphlet will try to answer some of your more pressing questions. We hope it is helpful. First, your crime. Tax evasion is the willful nonpayment of taxes due and owing to the government. It is, like murder, rape, and burglary, one as old as mankind. When you don't pay your taxes, you are a tax evader.

An illustration in the margin, showing a man (labeled YOU) in an office (labeled IRS) extending money to a second man (labeled IRS AGENT), had a large red "X" through it.

If you had not already been convicted of this crime, you would not be reading this helpful pamphlet. Therefore, you already know something of how the crime is committed. Let's go on now.

Since the Tax Reform Act of 1987, there has been only one income tax bracket for individual taxpayers, ninety-eight percent. (Corporations and those individuals whom the government allows to incorporate—doctors, dentists,

lawyers and a few of the larger individual taxpayers—pay under the older tax system to encourage growth in the economy. We all desire growth in our economy, don't we? You may have wondered why your corporate employer, if you have one, pays only about seven percent of his income in taxes. It is part of the incentive system built into the American Way of Life.)

Lamb skipped over the explanation of his crime, finding the section headed "Punishment."

Civil death allows anyone to take your property or kill you without repercussions. Since there is a certain danger in allowing citizens to go after you with guns, we usually assign a special agent to take care of the matter. If this punishment seems severe, consider our alternative. If we let one person—say, you—get away with tax evasion, we would have to let everyone else get away with it, right? Such is the American System of Equal Justice.

The history of the 1987 Reform Law bears us out. Shortly after its passage, many foolish people unpatriotically refused to pay the new ninety-eight percent rate. Your government tried to put these people in jail but the United States Supreme Court foiled your government, holding imprisonment for tax evasion to be imprisonment for debt and therefore unconstitutional. What could your government do in such a situation? What would you have done? Gone out of business? Hardly. The concept of Civil Death, so traditionally a part of the English Common Law that it is mentioned in Blackstone (see 4 Blackstone Commentaries 380) was codified (made the law of the land, our land) by Congress (our Congress) with only minor modi-

fications for current circumstances. Therefore, when you are eventually found and killed, as you will be, your possessions will escheat (go to) the state and you will be buried, ignominiously, without a marker of any kind or type, public or private, in the middle of the road.

We hope this informative pamphlet has been of help.

A stamped legend on the back page read *Courtesy of your local IRS office, M. Recaudador, Agent.*

A coffee cup appeared between Lamb and the pamphlet. He looked up. Shirley, holding the cup, smiled.

"Coffee?"

"Shirley."

"What?"

"They're going to bury me in the middle of the road."

"Who, dear?"

Lamb's index finger shot out, pointing at the hall door. "*Them! Recaudador and the IRS. I'm dead, Shirley, civilly dead!*"

She set the cup on the coffee table and took the pamphlet. "It can't be that bad, Joe."

"It *is!*"

He handed her the notice. She read both notice and pamphlet, her frown deepening the longer she read. When she finished, he waited for her impressions.

"Well?"

Shirley shivered. "It is, Joe. It is."

"I told you. You never believe anything I say. *What, Shirley, am I going to do?*"

"Pay them?"

Momentarily Lamb's face hardened. "The bloodsuckers."

Shirley had heard the speech before and waved him into

silence. "We'll think of something, Joe. Do we have the money to pay them now?"

"Of *course* not. What do you think we've been living on?"

"The dole? Like everyone else."

Lamb slammed his fist down on the coffee table. The cup hopped, sloshing coffee. "*Never!*"

"Joe," said Shirley, her voice insistent, "this is not the time for principle. More's at stake than principles *or* money."

Lamb, dubious, squinted. "What?"

"Your life, for one thing."

"Oh, that."

His anger disappeared, replaced by fear. Civilly dead. The words rang in his mind as though someone were in there playing kick the can. Especially the last one, dead, a gigantic gong of a word.

Controlling himself, taking a deep breath and sipping his cold coffee, he forced himself to concentrate. He had to think clearly. In spite of the violence it did to his convictions, there was only one alternative. Pay them, thereby and forthwith avoiding the violence they would do to his person.

He got up and went to the phone.

"Joe," said Shirley. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to pay them. It's the only alternative. What's their number? Ten-forty something, isn't it?"

"It's too late for that Joe."

Lamb hesitated, hand on the phone, a cheap non-visual model, looking at her. "Too late?"

"Didn't you read their pamphlet?" She shook *Tax Evasion: The Crime and The Punishment* at him, emphasizing her question.

"Yes."

"It's right here." She thumbed through it. "Here it is, in

the middle, next to the full page drawing of the man called YOU being shot.”

“The middle?” said Lamb. “I skipped the middle. Read it.”

“ ‘Once convicted,’ ” read Shirley, “ ‘as you now are, there is no escaping punishment (see following section). Neither payment nor bribes will be sufficient (will be enough to get you off the hook). An example must be made of you. It may comfort you to know that the example you make will deter others from your folly (foolishness).’ ” She looked up from the pamphlet. “That’s it.”

“They don’t *want* my money?”

“No.”

“They suck my blood for *twenty-five years* and now they don’t want even a *pint*?”

“They want your blood all right, but they get your property anyway once you’re dead.”

Dead. The word gonged. Lamb thought. Next to the phone, he noticed a pencil and tablet. He made a list, entering assets on the left side and liabilities on the right side. He had to use an extra sheet to finish off the right-hand column. Only one item stood in the left-hand column, his truck.

“Wheels,” he mumbled, mulling. “Movement.” His speculations crystalized into resolve.

“Go,” he said, and started to, heading for the door.

“Go?” said Shirley.

“Go,” repeated Lamb. He reached the door.

“Where?”

He hesitated, hand on the knob. He turned to her, his expression one of stone determination. “Mexico.”

“In your shorts?”

Without a word, Lamb went into the bedroom, emerging ten minutes later, dressed and ready to go, his only luggage a toothbrush in his jacket pocket. Shirley stopped him at the door.

“What about *us*, Joe?”

“I’ll send for you. You’ll be safer here.”

She burst into tears, covering her face with her hands. “Be careful, Joe. Please, be careful.”

He glanced at his watch. “I’ve got a little under an hour and a half before I’m dead. It’s a good head-start.”

She removed her hands from her eyes. Her tear-smeared cheeks moved him. He kissed her, remembering the years of happy marriage. He restrained his own tears and swept her up, hugging her and speaking quietly into her ear. “Thank God for one thing.”

“What?” she sobbed.

“Thank God we never filed a joint return.”

Still sobbing, she agreed. Quickly, before Shirley could protest, he cast her aside and stepped into the corridor. Empty. Quietly, he descended the stairs, checking at each landing for any sign of Recaudador. On the street, he pulled back into the entrance niche of the building and looked both ways. Morning traffic had begun. Several cars cruised past. None of them contained Recaudador.

His rig, a semi-truck with a gasoline trailer, full, stood halfway down the block. He glanced at his watch. Seven-forty. Still over an hour before he could be killed. He stepped out of the entranceway, walking quickly toward the truck. His hiking boots, donned in case he had to abandon the truck, sounded heavily on the pavement. No sign of Recaudador.

He unlocked the truck and climbed up into the cab, wonder-

ing about the wisdom of taking the awkward rig at all. The motorcycle in the garage would have been faster. He inserted the key, pausing to pat the dashboard.

“But more vulnerable,” he said.

Besides, in Mexico, he could sell the load of gas and the truck, giving him enough of a stake for a civilized life after civil death.

He started the turbine. Gauges hopped to life, pressure, generators. The turbine whinned momentarily, then settled to a constant murmur. When Lamb started trucking, the big rigs had piston engines, throbbing piston engines. Now they murmured. He considered it a distinct loss of machismo, but the trucks ran better.

He glanced in the sideview mirror, noticing with affection the long expanse of curved tank behind him. No need for running lights this late in the morning. He eased the truck away from the curb. Something red—a car—appeared momentarily in the sideview mirror, then disappeared behind the tank. He flipped on the rearview TV camera.

A Ford Conquistador, red with gigantic air scoops in the hood, followed him. Over the air scoops, hands gripping the steering wheel, he could see the top half of a face. The eyes, staring intensely between the knuckles, startled him.

“Recaudador.”

Grimly, he flipped off the rear camera, glancing at his watch. Seven-fifty. Ten minutes of precious time gone. Ahead, the San Diego Freeway overpass appeared. He braked and started onto the cloverleaf. Once rolling, Lamb’s Mack Turbine IV could hit a hundred and sixty kilometers an hour without trying. He would use the truck lane in the center of the freeway. Recaudador, restricted to the auto lanes, would

be able to do only a hundred k's. The Ford would be only a memory.

The turbine whined and groaned, slowly pulling its heavy burden up the freeway ramp.

"Level ground straight ahead, baby."

The truck reached the crest, merged briefly with the auto traffic and eased into the separated truck lane at the first entrance. Long-distance trucks, easily breaking a hundred and eighty, hurtled toward him, roaring past, inches away, heading north, their wakes rocking even the stable frame of the Mack IV.

Gently, Lamb pushed the accelerator. The rig lumbered, gaining momentum, fifty, sixty, seventy kilometers an hour. He began to feel the resistance ease. Cross-country trucks, designed aerodynamically to pull great weights through air, functioned better above seventy kilometers an hour, best above a hundred. Cracking top speed, close to two hundred, they almost flew. Occasionally, head-on, two trucks met in the center lane, demolishing a half kilometer of freeway. Even ejection seats failed to help when the combined speed at point of impact neared four hundred kilometers an hour.

The speedometer readout settled at one-fifty. Lamb relaxed, feeling the easy hum of the turbine beneath him and the solid traction of the tires. He decided to flick on the rear camera. Its field was wide enough to include the car lanes. One last look at the dwindling Recaudador. He touched the switch.

Startled, he flicked it off immediately. An illusion? Had the red Ford been *that* close to the camera? He flicked it on again. Air scoops filled half the screen."

"The bastard's right on my bumper, riding inside my slipstream."

Lamb jammed on the brakes, bracing himself for the crash. Eighteen tires locked and squealed. Lamb saw the smoke of burning rubber in the sideview mirror. A northbound truck shot past with a rocking *poomp* of air. No crash came. He looked at the screen.

Recaudador, his face drained of color, remained behind him, only a few meters from the camera.

“He’s got good reactions, anyway.”

Lamb pushed the truck up to a hundred and fifty, settling to an even pace. He had to think. At this rate, Recaudador would hang on his tail from Los Angeles to Tijuana. By the looks of its hood scoops, the Ford could pace him, probably pass him, without difficulty. It would be impossible to make it to Tijuana by nine o’clock, but at two hundred k’s he could get close, perhaps close enough. The last few minutes would be a dead run for the border.

Lamb pushed the rig toward two hundred, glancing at the fuel gauge. Enough. He relaxed over the big steering wheel, noticing his weariness for the first time.

“On two hours sleep, they do it to me.”

Still, in action, Lamb felt better. At least he had a plan, direction. If he died, it would be like a man, not some cowering rat in a government housing project. He glanced at the rearview screen to check on Recaudador.

“Gone?” He checked the sideview mirror. “The man’s got guts.”

Recaudador had shifted the Ford into the north-bound lane, trying to pass Lamb.

“What does he think he’s doing?”

The passenger window of the Ford came even with the truck cab. Fascinated, Lamb watched. Driving with one

hand at two hundred kilometers an hour, Recaudador leaned across the front seat and rolled down the passenger window. The wind whipped his neatly divided black hair to fluff. He mouthed something, pointing at the dashboard. Lamb tried, unsuccessfully, to see into the Ford's darkened front seat. He shrugged at Recaudador, unable to decipher his message.

Ahead, a dot appeared in the north-bound lane, enlarging. Lamb waited a few seconds, then turned slowly to Recaudador, pointing toward the oncoming truck and grinning.

Recaudador looked up, panicked, jammed his brakes. The red Ford seemed to suddenly reverse directions, dwindling to a red speck in the rearview camera. The north-bound truck rushed by with a *whoomp*.

Lamb laughed, remembering the look of terror on Recaudador's face, then stopped abruptly, realizing the meaning of his laughter. If Recaudador's reactions had been slower, he would be splattered all over the freeway, a paste as red as his Ford. By delaying two seconds, Lamb had almost killed a man, a tax man, true, but still a man. Lamb's desperation was brutalizing his sensibilities, making him think and feel like the thing he most hated, the IRS. He shivered at the realization.

In the rearview camera, the red dot grew, becoming the Ford. What had Recaudador been trying to do? What did pointing at his dashboard mean? Lamb glanced at the truck's dashboard. Instrumens, fuel, pressure, air conditioning, radio—*radio*. The citizen's band radio. Lamb switched it on, turning to channel 9, the emergency channel. He set the transmitter for voice actuation to free his hands.

“Hello? Recaudador? This is Big Mack Four. Are you there?”

“I’m here,” said Recaudador.

Lamb glanced in the rearview screen. Recaudador was indeed there, one hand on the Ford’s steering wheel and the other holding a microphone.

“What do you want?” asked Lamb.

“You cannot escape, Mr. Lamb.”

“We’ll see.”

“No one escapes. The IRS always gets its man.”

“There’s always a first time.”

“Mr. Lamb, give up. Suffer your punishment with dignity—death with dignity, Mr. Lamb, not fleeing. Think of your children. How will they remember you? As a man who took his deserved punishment *like* a man, or who fled in cowardly terror?”

“Leave my children out of it. This is between me and the IRS.”

“Correct, but even vicious running-dog criminals must think of their families.”

“*Vicious*,” exploded Lamb, noticing the interchange for the Newport freeway flash past. “Running *dog*! All I *did* was not give you bloodsuckers your thirteen quarts. You call that vicious?”

“I do. The system is designed to provide you with all your basic needs. If you receive society’s services, you must pay your way. Only a vicious running-dog ingrate would do otherwise.”

“I have taken nothing from the State since the day I decided the State had taken too much. I *have* been paying my own

way. I even pay rent on that rathole apartment. And with my *own* money.”

“Do you drive on the public roads?”

Since Lamb was in the process of doing so, the question struck him as a bit stupid. “Of course.”

“Do you pay for the privilege?”

“I pay for gas. That’s two-thirds tax. I pay for the license to operate this truck. Isn’t that *enough*?”

“Not by half. Fifty percent of highway maintenance and construction funds come from Federal sources. You pay no Federal taxes. It is a perverted act, Mr. Lamb.”

“You’re *sick*, Recaudador.”

“It is you who are sick and in thirty-three minutes you will be dead.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“We will indeed. Give yourself up, Mr. Lamb, *now*. We will wait out the thirty-two minutes together, perhaps have a cup of coffee and talk. I have always been interested in abnormal psychology. Then, at precisely nine o’clock, painless, I will put my pistol to your head and—”

Lamb snapped off the radio.

“Vulture,” he snorted. “Sadistic vulture.”

Remembering the cold touch of Recaudador’s small automatic against his navel, Lamb imagined it behind his ear.

“And in the center of the road, they’ll bury me.”

Minutes passed. A sign, indicating the Camp Pendleton turnoff, appeared briefly. If he evaded Recaudador, even the Marines would be after him.

The truck rolled over a rectangle of fresh asphalt, patching the freeway. Another tax resister, ignominiously buried on the

San Diego Freeway? Possibly. A chill engulfed him at the sight. He flipped on the radio.

"Bloodsucker?"

"Mr. Lamb, I wish you would refrain from calling me that. I try to be civil to you."

"Can we make a deal!"

"No deals. The pamphlet I gave you explains that. Read it carefully and you will understand the full extent of your folly before you die. It contains everything pertinent."

"Listen, what's one person more or less. There are two hundred and fifty million taxpayers in this country. In Mexico, I can sell this truck and—"

"*Ahhh*, Mexico. So it is Mexico, is it? A foolish choice. The border is sealed and well-patrolled. As to your question, everyone matters to us. We try to treat all of our two hundred and *forty-seven* million taxpayers as individuals with individual problems and life-styles. We are public servants, Mr. Lamb. It is a matter of principle. But Mexico, it is hopeless for you."

"Have you ever seen a truck this size crash a barrier?"

"No."

"Nothing short of a tank can stop it."

"If necessary, Mr. Lamb, we have tanks. Tanks and aircraft, even satellite tracking."

"You're bluffing. Right now, it's just you and me."

"Correct, but I can call in help at any time. However, as a matter of personal pride, I prefer to treat taxpayers and even nontaxpayers as people, each with a personality, not simply as an object of scorn. I feel that attitude is already too widely held in our department. Thus, the hunt becomes—how shall I say it—more persona, more savory.

Man to man, mind to mind, wits. Mr. Lamb, a battle of wits, and frankly, yours are somewhat dim." He paused, then: "Mexico, indeed."

"You *are* sick."

"I am a public servant."

"*SICK!*" shouted Lamb and clicked off, glancing at his watch. Ten minutes to death. He floored the truck. The speedometer read out two-twenty. The chain-link fence separating the auto and truck lanes had ceased to exist, blurred to nothing by motion. Only lightpoles on the far side of the freeway, flicking past like a picket fence, remained visible. Under him, the turbine howled.

"Come on, baby, Mexico, warm sun, tequilla, wild burritos coming down from the hills to eat in the yard of Don Joe's hacienda."

The outskirts of San Diego became visible. Briefly, he glimpsed the Pacific, a blue patch over a hill. The freeway led straight to the border station beyond San Diego. A weekday, there would be few cars at the crossing point. He could pick an empty lane and hurtle through, smashing the barrier to freedom.

To the right of the freeway, he saw a bank building, time and temperature displayed on the sign below the name. Nine-oh-five. Sixty-eight degrees. Nine-oh-five! Lamb realized he was *dead*, officially *dead*.

He glanced in the rearview screen. No Ford. Sideview mirror. The Ford was pulling up, risking another head-on collision. Recaudador must want him to switch on the radio, no doubt for some formal government ceremony, a death pronouncement or something. Lamb tried the radio. Dead air. He glanced out the window. Recaudador, even with him, was

signaling, turning his arm in a cranking motion. He wanted the truck window lowered like his own.

Lamb cracked his window, beginning to roll it down. A solid gust of air disarrayed his hair. He stopped. Something—the end of a piece of tubing?—had appeared in Recaudador's passenger window. Almost too late, Lamb recognized the shotgun barrel. He swerved, sideswiping the Ford. He heard nothing. The glass next to his face seemed to frost suddenly, reminding him of cracked ice. None of the shot had penetrated. The Ford, behind him again, gained. The main force of the blast had struck the rear of the cab. Lamb flipped on the radio.

“You *bastard!* You're trying to *kill* me.”

“That, Mr. Lamb, has been the general idea all along.”

Lamb switched off. Think. Recaudador would try for the tires next. If he disabled two or three, the game would be up. *Wits, use your wits.* The phrase kept recurring to him.

Lamb fished in his jacket pocket for the IRS's informative pamphlet. Perhaps glancing over it would stimulate his wits. Holding the wheel with one hand and the pamphlet with the other, he glanced alternately at the pamphlet and the road. He skimmed the first section. He remembered it well enough from the morning.

A footnote, next to an illustration of the man called YOU fleeing through city streets, caught Lamb's attention. It had evidently been taken directly from IRS regulations. He read it aloud, in installments, glancing up at the road.

“ ‘If, during the taxable year . . . immediately preceding the year of nonpayment . . . the taxpayer makes a . . . capital expenditure exceeding the income . . . of that taxable year . . . and due to an act of an agent, conservator, guarantor . . . or

other such person employed by or functioning in the . . . capacity of an employee or other similar situation . . . of the IRS, proximately causes, in the two years succeeding, the loss of the heretofore mentioned capital investment . . . no tax liability for the year of nonpayment devolves on the non-taxpaying taxpayer . . . or similarly situated persons.’ ”

A string of numbers indicated the volume and section number of the regulation. Since it was only a footnote, there was no helpful explanation in English. Still, it seemed, somehow, vaguely, to apply to Lamb. He switched on the radio.

“Recaudador?”

No answer.

“Recaudador, you . . . you . . .” Lamb searched his mind for the proper epithet. A sign appeared and was gone, an arrow with the number 10 and the word *Mexico*. “. . . you bandito, speak to me.”

“What do you want now, Mr. Lamb. You realize this automobile comes from the IRS car-pool. You have damaged it severely. The repair costs will be charged against your estate.”

“What is this footnote on page thirteen of your booklet?”

“It does not apply to you.”

“Explain it to me.”

“I will *not*. You are an insane criminal.”

“Criminals are still citizens, aren’t they?”

“Yes, but—”

“And you claim to be a public servant.”

“I *am* a public servant.”

“Then explain it.”

Recaudador grunted. “It is a provision for capitalists. *You*,

Mr. Lamb, are not a capitalist. As I said before, you are insane. It is to encourage capital investment by allowing a deduction and tax forgiveness for a government-destroyed capital asset. Does that clear it up?"

"Not much."

Lamb switched off. Destroyed capital asset. What capital assets did he own? Only the truck. Only—

Lamb pushed the accelerator more firmly to the floor. Ahead, the low-roofed shed of the Tijuana border station stretched across twelve lanes of highway. Beyond it, the traffic funneled into a dirt road. The direct readout speedometer sat at two-sixty. Wind whistled through the cracks in the door window. Lamb prepared to eject.

He glanced in the rearview screen. Recaudador, driving with his right hand, had his left out the window, firing at the truck's tires. A stray bullet smashed into the sideview mirror, then another hit the rearview camera. The screen went blank.

The border station enlarged, growing in height and width. Tiny figures, suddenly alert, tried to signal a stop, waving their arms back and forth over their heads. The arms stopped, fell to the sides. The figures panicked, fleeing, escaping to the fields on either side of the station.

Lamb reached above his head and jerked down the transparent crash curtain, covering his face and simultaneously activating the seat panels that encapsulated him. He heard the explosive bolts fire. The top of the cab ripped away. He ejected. A jarring, teeth-grinding explosion sent him through the open roof. A tidal wave of air whipped and thrashed him, tumbling man and seat. The chute fired. Lamb jerked to a halt, beginning to descend slowly.

Below him, the Turbine Mack IV lay on its side, jackknifed, cab on the Mexican side of the station, tank on the American.

Something sparked and flashed. A plume of flame erupted from the tanker, climbing upward, billowing orange and black, passing Lamb.

He prepared to hit the ground. It came up fast, faster than he expected. Abruptly, it arrived. A sudden jolt and Lamb was down—encapsulating panels kicked aside—on his feet and running.

Ahead of him, extending across the field as far as he could see stood the Great Wall of Mexico, erected initially to keep out *braceros* but later maintained to keep in nontaxpayers. Lamb's chest heaved with the exertion of running. He glanced back. In the distance, he saw the red Ford pulled to the shoulder of the road. Between himself and the Ford, Recaudador ran, gaining ground.

"The man's in shape," said Lamb, trying to force a final effort out of his adrenal glands.

He reached the wall, seven meters high and built from redwoods shipped down from the stripped national forests of Northern California. He veered, running parallel to it, hoping to find an opening. Ahead of him, one appeared, chest high, evidently some kind of observation hold to see into the Mexican side. He sprinted the last few steps, breath rasping in his throat and blood pounding in his head, then caught himself against the wall. Panting, he peered through the hole, testing it for size. His shoulders bumped both sides. In ordinary circumstances, he would have considered the hole too small to penetrate. Desperation drove him to try. Straining, he worked his shoulders through. Behind him, the sound of a small automatic began, *ping, ping*. He heard the bullets thump into the wood. Lamb scrambled through, falling head long onto the ground like a sack of bones.

"Freedom," he gasped and kissed the soil.

Above him, a voice spoke, quietly.

“Mr. Lamb.”

He looked up, still panting. Recaudador, evidently standing on something, leaned through the observation hole, his shoulders easily missing the sides, arms extended, both hands carefully pointing the automatic at Lamb’s forehead, smiling.

“You can’t *touch* me here. I’m in Mexico.”

“Do you see that marker a hundred meters from here?”

Lamb glanced away from the wall. A stubby concrete marker showed in the distance. “Yes.”

“That,” said Recaudador, mirth in his voice, “is Mexico. We at the IRS are not fools when it comes to walling people in.”

Lamb felt his face turn cold and sweat blossom on his forehead. Desperately, he dug in his jacket pocket.

“Mr. Lamb, do you have any last words before punishment is exacted?”

“*Yes! Yes, I do!*” shouted Lamb, still rummaging in his jacket. He found it, the pamphlet. Quickly, he opened it to page thirteen, the footnote. He thrust it toward Recaudador, who backed away minutely. “*Here, read this.*”

“I am familiar with all our official publications.”

Lamb stabbed at his own chest with his thumb. “It applies to me, I tell you! Isn’t my truck a capital asset? I *own* it, you know.”

“I suppose so, but—”

“I bought it in December, 1997, in the year before my year of nonpayment.”

Recaudador frowned, emitting a thoughtful, prolonged, “Yes.”

"And you are an IRS agent and your shooting at me caused me to lose my ass . . . ah . . . set."

"But," said Recaudador, pensive, momentarily lowering the automatic, "you have already been convicted."

Vigorously, Lamb shook his head. "It *doesn't* matter. Read your damn regulation. It doesn't say *anything* about conviction, just nonliability if the loss occurs within two years of purchase, *and*," added Lamb to insure a correct interpretation, "that truck was worth four times my annual income."

Recaudador scowled, snapping, "Lemme see that damn pamphlet."

Lamb handed it over. Recaudador read the footnote, mumbling imprecations against the IRS lawyers who wrote it. Finally, he looked up, shaking his head slowly.

"You *see*," said Lamb.

"Unfortunately, I do see."

Recaudador pocketed the automatic and started to dismount whatever he was standing on.

"Recaudador."

The tax man hesitated. "What?"

"I can go?"

"Of course you can go. This is a free country," answered Recaudador, mumbling something.

"Pardon me?" said Lamb, unable to catch the last part of the sentence.

"I said," said Recaudador, his expression suggesting annoyance with everything in general and life on Earth in particular, "as soon as I get back to Los Angeles, I'm going to write my Congressman about these damn tax loopholes."

Recaudador disappeared below the level of the observation hole.

“Loopholes,” said Lamb, picking himself up. “Loopholes.”

He walked toward Mexico.

PROJECTIONS

MR. LEWIS OF THE STATE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE has asked me to write out this statement before I leave California. They are still considering whether to bring charges against Tony Wentworth, whether there *are* any charges they can bring against him. The state's Fair Campaign Practices Act evidently fails to cover telethesia projectors.

OK, Mr. Lewis, you said tell my story in as much detail as possible but "stick to the facts." I know you only want me to talk about Tony's role in it. You want "the big fish." (You used that phrase at least four times during our interview, "the big fish.") Us minnows have to tell the story the way it happened to us.

First, there was Mr. Winthrop, my former employer (perhaps still my employer: I have never, officially, quit). The Winthrop. What shall I tell you first about the Winthrop? That he may or may not be crazy? That's true of all of us, isn't it, Mr. Lewis. About eight months before the June primary, in mid-October (October 14, 1993, 2:00 PM—is that enough of a fact for you?) I did think the Winthrop was nuts, though not crazy. I remember discussing this profound insight with Opal, the Winthrop's secretary. I remember saying. "He's nuts, Opal."

"Shh, Roger, please."

"Flipped, off his rocker, loony."

"Roger, he'll hear you."

I leaned across her desk, standing but resting my chin on

my palms and my elbows on the desk, gazing into her opalescent blue eyes. Odd effect. Bad lighting.

“Opal.”

“What?”

“Is he still meditating?”

“That’s what he told me.”

“Was he serious?”

“He sounded serious.”

“Opal.”

“What?”

“Let’s go out tonight and eat dinner and have a few drinks and go back to my place and hit the sack.”

She glanced around, furtive, embarrassed. “Roger, you’re just *hor-rible*.”

“I know.”

“Besides,” said Opal, the ever unattainable, “I’m busy.”

“With who?”

“Whom,” she corrected.

“Opal,” I said, leaning closer, my heels lifting off the carpet, “this is not the time for grammar. This is you and me I’m talking about.”

“You and I?”

She pondered, looking past my ear. Grammar ploy again. She spent too much time reviewing ad copy. I got my perfectly idiomatic, ungrammatical ad copy back from her so twisted into proper grammar it sounded like a poor imitation of an Englishman. *It is I at the door for whom you have longed. I have fetched six containers of Burgher Beer. Now we too shall love.* The original read, *It’s me, baby. I got the Burgher. Let’s get at it.* (Closeup of girl with knowing smile, smiling knowingly.)

“You want to hear my problem, Opal?”

My fingers, toying with the blond spicurl in front of her ear, were brushed away. “I know your problem.”

“I’ll tell you anyway.”

“Not that beer thing. He doesn’t want to see you again about that beer thing.”

“But I want to see him again about that beer thing. Let me tell you about it.”

She let me. One of her clients, Burgher Beer, submitted an ad campaign thinking their influence with us and our connections with the media would get it spread across billboards and smiling out of the cube. The beer magnate himself thought up both the innovation and the ad, casting himself and his wife and the lead roles.

Burgher Beer’s Revolutionary
Ever-Upright Bottle
IT FLOATS!

Wonderful, I thought when I saw it, but who cares? The bottle had a valve in the neck. It let out beer without letting in water. Mr. Berger, president, owner, founder and principal consumer of Burgher Beer, spent a lot of time in his pool. He hated bottles sinking. When he reached out from his rubber raft, pudgy hand searching for the bottle, he wanted it there, bobbing. He assumed everyone did. He invented the valve. He invented the ad. He wanted himself and his wife in the ad, floating on their rafts amid a pool full of bottles.

“Wonderful,” I said, explaining it to Opal, “but who cares?”

“You, for one.”

“Only because the Winthrop pays me to care. And speaking

of Mr. W. who's he with?"

"I told you, he's not with anyone. He's meditating. When he's finished, he wants to see you."

At that precise moment, Mr. Lewis, I believed her. Watching the overhead lights twinkle in Opal's eyes, thinking about the Winthrop in his office—meditating—I knew something was wrong, seriously wrong. Meditating, plunging into his inner being, peeling back the onion layers of his personality, perhaps even examining his soul—an object he could only possess if it were mandatory for everyone like a liver—at that moment, I knew.

"He's dinghy."

"No, he's meditating."

"On what?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"An ad campaign?"

"I don't *know*. I told you."

"Burgher Beer, is he thinking—I mean, meditating on Burgher Beer?"

"*That* I do know. He is definitely not meditating on Burgher Beer."

"But he still wants to see me?"

She nodded.

"Opal, let's change tacks. You say you don't know what he's doing in there, right?"

"Wrong, I said he was meditating."

"Don't get petulant, Opal. Is there anything else peculiar going on around here?"

She thought a moment, puckering, frowning, then looked at me. "No."

“You’re sure.”

“Positive.” She started to return to the work on her desk, then looked up. “Except the crates, of course.”

“What crates?”

She held her hands wide apart. “Big crates. Two men moved them into his office this morning.”

I waited, expecting her to tell me more about the crates.

“And then?”

“And then nothing. The two men left. He closed the door. I heard some banging and he told me not to disturb him. He was meditating.”

“Then he asked for me. Opal, this is driving *me* nuts. What’s he *doing*?”

“There’s one other thing,” She looked at me, toying with me, making me ask the question.

I asked it. “What’s that?”

“He asked if anyone in the office knew anything about yoga. I told him you did. You do, don’t you?”

Yoga?

I stood up. I tried to remember everything I knew about yoga. A former girlfriend, a girl with a contortionist bent, had shown me several *asanas*, the postures yogis inflict on themselves. I remembered spending an evening with her, both of us playing with our own bodies when what I wanted to do was play with hers. I remembered her as a sort of sinewy, far-eastern drill sergeant, trying to teach me to breathe. “Roger, sit up straight. Remember, breathe from the bottom up. Breathing is very important.”

Who could deny it?

The relationship with the yogi lasted only a few, twisted weeks. She did everything in one or the other of the yogic

postures, a disconcerting, occasionally disabling—once or twice almost crippling—hindrance to the development of good karma between us. Still, my brief excursion into the exotic had left me with a residue of information about yoga. I had gotten over the sore muscles.

“Osborne,” called the Winthrop, his office door open.

“Yes, sir.”

“You may come in now.”

I went in.

I expected to find the Winthrop in a full Lotus, or at least half a Lotus. (I will refrain, Mr. Lewis, from saying half a Lotus is better than none.) Instead, I found him at a table next to the wall, a pair of needle-nosed pliers in one hand and an impassive expression on his face. Only the pliers were unusual.

In front of him on the table stood some kind of electronics gear. I know less about electronics than I do about yoga. I recognized a hologram recorder, an oscilloscope, a soldering gun. The centerpiece, a heavily instrumented box about a meter high and half a meter wide, looked like a cross between a computer—its lower half flickered with readouts—and a microwave transmitter. The transmitter impression came from a ten-centimeter parabolic reflector on top, aimed in my general direction.

“Like it?” asked Mr. W.

“Hmm.” I answered, noncommittal.

“Know what it is?”

I guessed. “A death ray.”

“No. A telethedia projector.”

I tried to look intelligent. “I see.”

“Do you?”

"I think I do. The bottom is the telethesia part and the parabolic reflector is the projector part."

"Good guess. Osborne. Wrong, but good. What's the first law of advertising?"

Quiz time. "Get their attention."

"And the second?"

The Winthrop had thought up the Ten Commandments of Advertising to harass his employees. We were quizzed frequently. "Show, don't tell."

"Have I got your attention?"

He had my attention but the quiz, delivered as if addressing a retarded talking dog, annoyed me. Too soon after lunch.

"You've got it," I snapped, regretting the words as much as my tone of voice. "Let's cut the quiz and get on with the Show and Tell."

He looked at me. Smiling? Hard to tell with the Winthrop.

"Sarcastic young man, aren't you, Osborne?"

Once committed, go all out. To retreat would have left me in an even weaker position, probably one several stories down and out on the street. "Not particularly. I just can't stand that damn quiz business. You do it about twice a week. If you know the answer, don't ask the question. I didn't come in here to play multiple choice or true-false. If you want to show me that thing, show me. Otherwise, I've got Burgher Beer to worry about in my office."

A shocked corner of my brain kept calling me a fool and trembling. *Remember*, it groused, *the bills will be there even if you don't have a job.*

Throughout this speech, the Winthrop watched me, progressively more astonished. When I finished, he grinned, a grin whose arc complemented the bulbous curves of his nose.

He walked over to me, beaming with pleasure, and rebounded his fist off my shoulder, a comradely gesture I had never seen him use.

“God *damn*, boy. I was right about you. Character. I like it. I knew I saw that spark in you. The world is a *better* place, a *better* place.” The grin faded, disappearing as quickly as it surfaced. His normal expression, sober impassivity, returned. “To business.”

He stripped off his coat and unbuttoned his vest, simultaneously slipping out of his shoes. I wondered, momentarily, how far it would go. He stopped short of his trousers, leaving his vest loose around his torso. He began working through various yoga exercises, bending, twisting, turning, contorting. He paused, standing up but bent at the waist, hugging his knees and staring up at me from his kneecaps, his face red.

“You mentioned Burgher Beer.”

“Yes, I wanted to talk to you about—”

“Not now. Ever drink any?”

“Once.”

“Did you like it?”

My outburst to Mr. W. had started the afternoon right, Honesty seemed to be the theme. Normally, I hate bad-mouthing clients. Momentum kept me at it. “Not much.”

“Ever buy any?”

“No. Berger sent over a free case.”

Inverted, he nodded, thoughtful. “It’ll do.”

“For what?”

He ignored me, continuing his *asanas*. I recognized some of them from my yogi girlfriend: Cobra, Locust and a sort of Flamingo on one leg, holding his other foot—extended behind him—and trying to touch the carpet with his free hand.

"Mr. W."

"Hmm?"

"You're going to slip a disc."

"Quiet, Osborne."

He finished on the floor in a full Lotus, feet in his lap, staring at his telethesia projector. His expression, though previously impassive, had deepened to profound impassivity.

"Pass me those electrodes," he said.

I found them, each with a different color wire running back to the projector. "The whole batch?"

"The whole batch."

I passed them to him. He worked each one under his gray hair, his fingers practiced and expert.

"Now the remote control."

I found it, a hand-held box with four touchplates, and handed it to him. He began alternate nostril breathing, pressing closed one side of his nose while he breathed through the other. I looked at the electrodes. I looked at the switch in his hand. Momentarily, I had an uncomfortable premonition.

"Mr. W, you're not going to commit suicide or anything, are you?"

"Don't be silly. Quiet now."

He tapped a touchplate with his thumb. The hologram recorder started, thick tape moving past the laser head. Several readouts changed, meaningless numbers to me. I felt like a nonbeliever at some exotic religious ritual. Something important was happening. Without the proper background, the ceremony was incomprehensible.

Watching the Winthrop—legs crossed, wires sprouting from his gray hair—made me uneasy. I knew his background as well as anyone, two PhDs from UCLA— psychology and electronics—years of unswerving ambition to reach the top of

the ad game (said by some to be the best ad man who ever lived), his peculiar blend of vivid imagination and cutthroat business practices. Everything—the yoga, the projector, the Winthrop—fit with what I knew, yet remained incomprehensible. I felt like a man seeing a familiar object whose name he had forgotten. *Oh, yes, one of those . . . those . . . whatdoyoucallits.*

The Winthrop's thumb moved. The tape stopped, rewound, started over. His look of impassivity vanished. A smile appeared on his face, grew broader, culminated in an expression of utter delight, wide-eyed and childish.

"Mr. Winthrop?"

The tape stopped. The delight vanished. Mr. W plucked the electrodes from his hair, took his feet out of his lap and stood up.

"That," he said, evidently satisfied, "is that."

"What—if I can ask—is that?"

"First things first, Osborne." He put on his shoes and coat, then buttoned his vest. "Coffee?"

II

I'M COMING TO THE PART ABOUT TONY, MR. LEWIS. If you keep coming in here every two minutes and reading over my shoulder and asking how it's going, it won't go at all.

In the ground-floor coffee shop of the Winthrop Building, the Winthrop asked me what I knew about California politics.

"You mean, all Sacramento is divided into three parts, legislative, executive, judicial—that sort of thing?"

He nodded. "More or less. We have a new client."

"Who?"

“Tony Wentworth.” (Satisfied, Mr. Lewis? “The big fish” mentioned at last.)

He studied my face for a reaction. I drank my coffee, hoping the cup would conceal it. At the time, nothing I knew about Tony—and I knew very little—impressed me. Other than party affiliation. I have few prejudices against Republicans. Even so, Tony left me cold. I remembered seeing him during his previous campaign. I tried and failed to remember his position on any of the issues. I attributed my memory lapse to Tony’s location. Northern California. The issues he raised, regional and complicated, had little impact in Southern California.

The Winthrop, dissatisfied at my lack of reaction, added, “He wants to be governor.”

He got a reaction. I snorted into my coffee, sloshing it over the edge of the cup.

“You don’t like the idea, Osborne?”

“He’s not exactly, Mr. Charisma.”

“He’s a challenge.”

“So’s swimming to Catalina with an apple in your mouth, but who cares?”

“You do. Starting tomorrow.”

“Me? But—”

“No buts. I’m sending you up to San Francisco as our liaison man.”

“But Mr. W, *I’m* a Democrat.”

“Good. It will give you objectivity. You’ll need objectivity.”

I thought about it. What could I lose? Working on the Wentworth campaign had to be more interesting than working on the floating bottle campaign. Plus, I had always

wanted to drive my motorcade through the corridors of power, especially with someone else paying for gas.

“Expense account?”

He nodded.

“OK, I’ll do it.”

“Opal has your plane tickets in the office.”

“With my name already on them?”

“Of course.” He grinned. “I sell things for a living, Osborne.” The grin faded, “Let’s get back upstairs. It’s your turn.”

My turn? Yoga and wired for sound?

Feeling I had somehow, subtly, been sold, I followed Mr. W back to his office. Was he planning to plug me into his machine? Remembering the infantile expression on his face. I decided to decline the honor. I had heard about the rats who preferred stimulating their brains to eating.

In his office, he pointed at a spot on the floor. “Stand there.”

I inspected the carpet. It seemed safe enough. I stood on the spot. When I looked up, Mr. W was adjusting the parabolic reflector on top of his machine, sighting over it and aiming at me.

“Wait a minute, Mr. Win—”

Too late. The hologram recorder started. I waited, expecting anything from my hair standing on end to a lightning bolt jumping from the reflector to my forehead. Nothing happened. The tape rolled. The readouts read out. I stood, slightly bored—even sluggish—watching the tapes and readouts.

“Feel anything?” asked Mr. W, checking his readouts.

“No.”

I kept thinking my time could be better spent. Even drinking Burgher Beer would have been more useful. I visualized the bottle, then closeups of the valve in the neck. I remembered the pool in my apartment building. I would spend enough time in the pool when summer arrived and enough time drinking beer. A floating bottle might have advantages. Perhaps I would call Berger during the day and have him send over a case or two.

“Feel anything yet?”

“Not a thing.”

Better yet, why impose on Berger’s generosity? I could buy a few cases on my way home. I liked that idea best. I smiled. I grinned, happy with my solution. A genuinely delightful prospect, even rewarding, to spend a few hours in the pool with a Burgher. The People’s Beer.

The tape ended. Mr. W looked at me. He seemed to want some kind of response. I shook off my lethargy.

“Well?” asked Mr. W.

“Well what?”

“What do you think?”

“About what?”

“For starters, what do you think about Burgher Beer?”

“Oh, I’ll probably pick up a couple of cases on the way home. I—” *Pick up a couple of cases! I hated Burgher Beer!*

“Wait a minute, Mr. W.” I shook my head. “I’m confused.”

“First,” said Mr. W. watching my face carefully, “you felt sleepy, sluggish. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you thought about Burgher Beer, the bottle, then the valve.”

I nodded.

“Then you evaluated it and decided to buy some. Your decision delighted you.”

“I walked over to the table and inspected Mr. W’s machine. “What *is* this thing?”

“A telethesia projector. I told you.”

“How does it work?”

Fatal question. The Winthrop launched into a discussion so detailed, complicated and technical I could only get the highlights. The telethesia projector, a device developed by Mr. W in his spare time, would be his ultimate contribution to advertising. The idea had lurked in his mind since graduate school. With his PhD in psychology finished and his career direction—advertising—chosen, he decided to master the fundamentals of the most potent advertising medium of the Sixties, television. By fundamentals, he meant electronics with a smattering of communication and information theory. Deeply impressed by McLuhan, his PhD in electronics would help him master the medium while his PhD in psychology would help him master the message.

“It doesn’t matter where you start eating the apple,” aphorized Mr. W in the midst of his explanation. “Eventually you eat it all.”

I took that to mean psychology and electronics were only his first bites into the apple of advertising, a big apple if you judged success with Mr. W’s money.

In the mid-Eighties, he read a paper on generating Alpha and Theta rhythms in the brain through inductive fields, a technique used for sedation in hospitals. Technology had

caught up with his vision. If you could put people to sleep electronically, he reasoned, without attaching electrodes and without the subject being aware of the process, you could do other things. You could advertise Burgher Beer inside his cranium, an ideal method of getting across a client's message.

He spent the next seven years solving the technical problems. Electronically reproduced and induced Alpha and Theta rhythms were one thing. Modulating the signal with an intelligible comment about a product was something else. The modulation effect was Mr. Winthrop's contribution.

I stared at the parabolic reflector. It eyed me. I still had difficulty believing it. I had experienced it. *I* had been sold Burgher Beer, a feat akin to the proverbial Eskimo-icebox sale. Yet, intellectually, the idea of cutting out the middleman—the media networks, magazine tapes, billboards and matchbooks—cutting them out and advertising directly in the consumer's brain, devastated me. I pointed at the projector.

"This . . . this . . . *thing*—"

"Telethesia projector."

"—is utterly *diabolical*!"

He grinned. "Good, isn't it?"

"Good? It's *great*. I could sell Burgher Beer to the president of Schlitz with it. But Mr. W, it is the most complete and thorough invention for invading privacy since the lockpick."

"You're waxing poetic."

"It *scares* me."

"Don't be silly. It's just a machine."

"So's an H-bomb."

"I assure you, Osborne, it will not explode."

The conversation continued in this vein, slightly hysterical

on my side. I pointed out how the projector could destroy every guarantee of freedom since the Magna Carta. The Winthrop, calm, batted aside my protestations like flies, annoying but harmless. His technique—the studied, ad man’s technique—combined every known ruse; begging the question, argument from authority, *ad hominem*, *ad nauseam*.

At first, I thought he was consciously using the techniques, demonstrating his expertise. Eventually, I realized the evasions were habit, long engrained and automatic. He had been working on his projector for seven years, seeing it as the culmination of his career and a lasting contribution to the world. He was literally unable to see any objection to it.

Still, something more was involved in his blindness, something deeper within him, something on the bedrock level of his personal philosophy.

“Look,” I said, mustering my last negative argument, “if I told you I had developed a device that could vaporize the cortex of every brain in America—the world even—what would you say?”

He thought a moment. “I’d ask what you planned to do with it.”

“What does it matter? A device like that couldn’t possibly have any legitimate use.”

“Medically, it might be used to replace lobotomies, to vaporize the frontal lobes.”

“OK,” I said, exasperated at the irrelevant example, “medically, it might have some legitimate use, but generally—”

“Things aren’t used generally, Osborne. They are used specifically. The type of judgments you’re talking about only apply to people. If the person operating your vaporizer vaporized *everyone*, I would call it bad.”

At last, common ground. "Why?"

"It would ruin my ad business. If he only vaporized mongoloid idiots, I wouldn't care."

I felt a tremor in the common ground. "Why?"

"Mongoloid idiots aren't particularly susceptible to advertising and usually don't have much money to spend on products."

"Mr. W, you're judging *everything* subjectively."

"So are you. So does everyone."

"But you can't judge the whole world by the impact it has on your ad agency."

"Why not?"

"You just can't."

"Why?"

"Because." I had run out of arguments.

"Because," he said, walking around his desk and sitting down, "is hardly sufficient." He leaned back, cradling his head in his hands and gazing up at me. "You've got the makings of a good ad man, Osborne."

Here it came. He was going to fire me. Silently, I cursed my big mouth. Aloud, I said. "Thank you."

"Let me tell you something, something I believe but have never actually verbalized to anyone."

I waited, wondering how long he would give me to clean out my desk.

"I consider the world a better place when everyone is better. A qualitative standard, Osborne, and an old one. I like to think it reflects the Greek ideal of excellence, better ad men, better products, better consumers. Better cops, better robbers. For the world to get better, we must all get better. I have devoted my life to being the best ad man I could be, the best Woodrow Wilson Winthrop. An ad

man gets across the client's message. Once delivered, the message stands or falls on its own merits."

"But this message was inside my *head*."

"That's where all advertising ends up, isn't it?"

"True, but"—I pointed at his telethesia projector—"that thing takes the shortest route between two points. I could not *not* think about Burgher Beer, if you follow me."

He nodded, following me, probably ahead of me. "It got the message across."

"Not only that, it *motivated* me to *buy* that carbonated furniture polish." I held up two fingers, forked, eyeing him between them. "Two cases!"

"All advertising motivates, if it's any good."

He was confusing me. In seven years, he had thought through most of the objections. I needed more time to adjust. I poked at my temple with my index finger.

"But in my *head*. Mr. W! In my *head*!"

"Don't get hysterical, Osborne."

"It's *unavoidable* advertising."

"The best kind."

"It got across your message, but I had no free choice. I *had* to buy that beer. If you'd come up with two cases on the spot, I would have ripped my coat pocket to get out the cash."

"And now you're going to rush out and buy two cases?"

"Of course not."

"Why not?"

"I hate the stuff."

"And if you didn't know what it was like, would you buy some?"

"Probably, until I discovered I hated it."

During this exchange, Mr. W's hands had come down from behind his head. He had leaned progressively forward, hanging on my answers. He sat back, relaxed, smiling.

"That's advertising, Osborne."

"Are you going to use that thing in Wentworth's campaign?"

"We'll talk about that later. You've got enough to chew on for now. Opal will give you your tickets."

"Do you have any idea," I said to Opal when Mr. W's door slid closed behind me "what he's got in there?"

She jotted the flight number and departure time on the outside of my ticket folder, answering without looking up. "No."

"A mind thing."

She handed the ticket folder across the desk. "That's very interesting, Roger. Here's your tickets."

"Opal, it *advertises* inside your head. It's a *mind* thing, a *mind* thing."

"I think you've got a mind thing, Roger." She shook the ticket folder. "Take these before my arm drops off."

I looked at the folder, started to reach for it, then pulled back my hand. "No."

She shrugged and dropped the tickets on the desk. "OK, so don't take them. I don't care. But they won't let you on the plane without them."

"I'm not getting on the plane."

"Mr. Winthrop said you were leaving tomor—"

"I'm not."

I began pacing Opal's office, alternately, approaching and

retreating from Mr. W's door. Opal, an annoyed expression on her face, watched me, her head slowly moving from side to side.

"Do you mind," asked Opal, asking whether I minded or not, "if I ask why you're not going?"

"Because. That's why."

"That's hardly a reason."

"You sound just like"—I glared at Mr. W's door—"him."

I paced, thinking. The more I paced, the more I frowned. No doubt about it. The Winthrop planned to use his projector in the June '94 primary, then the November election, motivating—no, coercing—people to vote for Tony Wentworth.

"Who is this guy, anyway?" I asked.

"What guy?"

"Wentworth."

Opal inserted a file card in the viewer on her desk. "Anthony Edward 'Tony' Wentworth," she read. "Born, September 12, 1952, Mill Valley, California, BA, UC Davis, JD—What's a JD?"

"I think it's a law degree. All those politicians are lawyers. Just read it, please."

She read. I paced. Tony Wentworth, married, no living children (daughter stillborn), wife's name Carol, nee Kraftkind—

"Opal. I don't care what his wife's maiden name was, *or* what his maternal aunt's maiden name was. Would you get on to the important stuff."

"You're very irritable today, Roger."

"I've got a lot to chew on."

—entered politics in San Francisco, winning a spot on the

San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Two years later, he was elected Mayor, then State Senator, then a re-election as State Senator.

“Now he wants to be Governor,” I interrupted.

“He does?”

“Just read, Opal.”

She waded through election return statistics, campaign expenditures, everything but his maternal aunt’s maiden name. Only two things caught my attention. San Francisco, a Democratic city since Gold Rush days, had elected Wentworth to every office he sought. That—considering the usual shouting-into-the-wind posture of Republican politicians in San Francisco—seemed significant.

My second observation seemed more a curiosity than significant. In each election, except the re-election, his percentage of the vote declined.

“OK, that’s enough. It doesn’t change anything.”

Opal stopped reading. I kept pacing. Pacing, my resolve crystalized. I stopped, squarely facing Mr. W’s door.

“I won’t do it, Opal,” I said to the door.

“What? Go to San Francisco?”

“Any of it, I won’t do any of it.”

“He’ll fire you.”

“I’ll quit.”

I took a step forward. The proximity detector picked me up. The door opened. Mr. W, an inquiring expression on his face, looked up. I stepped inside, the door closing behind me.

“Osborne, what—”

“I quit.”

He pondered the words, frowning. “May I ask why?”

I pointed at the projector, its parabolic eye aimed un-

comfortably in my direction. "That."

"Osborne," said the Winthrop, exasperated, "we've been all through this. At coffee, you agreed—"

"At coffee, I didn't know about"—I jabbed my index finger at it, poking the air—"the Thing."

"Very good, Osborne. By changing the word 'that' to 'the Thing' you've personified the product. Unfortunately, it is still a machine."

"Unfortunately, I still quit." I turned to go, taking a step toward Opal's office. The door slid open.

"OSBORNE," boomed Mr. Winthrop, Opal's startled face looked up from her desk. "WHEN I'VE FINISHED TALKING TO YOU, YOU MAY DO ANY DAMN THING YOU PLEASE, BUT NOT UNTIL THEN. NOW COME BACK HERE."

Opal, her jaw slack, watched me turn and re-enter the office. The door closed. Mr. Winthrop took several deep breaths—full, yogic breaths—calming himself. Finally, he spoke, his serenity restored.

"I take it you find my invention objectionable."

"No, diabolic."

The word annoyed him. "Don't play with words, Osborne. Just get it off your chest."

"Good idea. You're going to use that damn thing in the Wentworth campaign. I don't want to have anything to do with it. I quit."

"You're repeating yourself."

"That's commandment number ten, isn't it? Repeat. Repeat."

"If you quit—"

"I do quit. I am quitting. I quit."

"If you quit, I guarantee you will never have a use for any of those commandments in California."

"I've always liked Alaska."

Anger flushed his face. His fist bounced once on the table. "Damn it, Osborne. I don't know what in Hell's name is the matter with you. I give you the biggest plum to come through this office in years and you get—I don't know *what* you've got, but whatever it is, it's unprofessional."

"Scruples."

He laughed, a snorting laugh, repeating the word, "Scruples. That's the silliest thing I've ever heard." He thought a moment, looking at me. "All right, Osborne, how much of a raise do you want?"

"I don't want a raise."

"What *do* you want?"

"First of all, I want that *thing* put back in the closet you dragged it out of. But since that's not going to happen, I want off the Wentworth bandwagon."

"Impossible."

"Then I quit."

He mulled things over, looking at the projector, his desk, me. "I may have misjudged you, Osborne. I don't think so, but I may have. I think you are a man after my own heart, a man who likes a challenge. So I'm going to give you a challenge. You go to San Francisco—"

"No."

"Don't interrupt."

"I'm no longer employed here. I'll interrupt if I feel like it."

"Don't be childish. Go there, get the lay of the land. If you can think of a way to market Tony Wentworth—a successful

way—without using the projector, I'll put it back in the closet. How's that?"

I thought about the proposition. If I quit, Mr. Winthrop would use his projector. He would sell Tony Wentworth to California like he had sold me Burgher Beer. The idea chilled me. On the other hand, if I stayed with the campaign, worked from the inside, tried to find some alternate way to make twenty-five million California voters love Wentworth—or at least vote for him—I might be able to serve broader interests than those of a single client. If I had to elect a Republican to do it, so what? In politics, I was beginning to realize, there were worse things than Republicans.

"If I can do it, sell Wentworth," I said, wanting one final assurance from the W, "you'll keep that thing out of the campaign."

He nodded. "Yes, if you can do it."

"It's a deal."

"Call me tomorrow afternoon, Osborne."

III

MR. LEWIS WAS JUST IN HERE. He read over what I had written, frowning more deeply the longer he read. He finished, looked up—shaking his head in annoyance—and said, "*I* don't care about Wentworth's aunt's maiden name either. *Or* Winthrop's. Please, as you say, get to the important stuff, Mr. Osborne."

Mr. Lewis, what *you* consider important and what *I* consider important are two separate things. I want you to have a clear picture of Tony, at least as clear as my picture of him. If I fail in that, I've left out the "important stuff."

I got my first look at Tony—and Carol—the day after my

discussion with Mr. W. I took a commuter flight to San Francisco. Carol, Tony's wife, met me at the airport. Waiting for my suitcases to pop onto the baggage carousel, someone touched my arm. I looked around. A brunette in Levi's and a brief red blouse smiled at me.

"Mr. Osborne?"

"Yes."

"I'm Carol Wentworth."

She looked twenty-six instead of thirty-six, both her face and—following her across the short concrete ramp to the parking area—her figure, clearly accented by the worn Levi's and bare midriff.

I stowed my suitcases in the back seat of her station wagon and got in. We left the airport and drove toward San Francisco, talking about my flight and my previous visits to San Francisco. She asked whether I had ever seen Tony "in action."

"Just on the cube."

"He's speaking at a park dedication today. We'll stop by there. Tony puts on a good show."

The last comment I discounted. Wives are seldom good critics of their husband's performances. "But you're missing the show. I thought political wives went everywhere with their husbands."

"Some do." She changed lanes, avoiding the steam cloud behind a bus. "I try. But Tony keeps up a hectic pace."

"It'll get worse before you drive this wagon up to the Governor's Mansion."

She laughed. "I'm sure of that. Tony's father says Woody Winthrop has some kind of invention that will help with the traffic between here and Sacramento."

"It's some kind of invention all right."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"I hope it won't be used."

"What does it do?"

"Invades privacy, among other things."

A slight frown appeared on her face. "How can that help Tony?"

"Good question. Mr. Winthrop will have to give you a good answer. I'm just his man on the spot."

On the spot. It described how I felt as much as where I was. If Carol's questions, mild compared to those Tony would probably ask, disconcerted me, how would I look later, mumbling and stumbling, trying to explain why I opposed my employer's methods? Why did Mr. W *want* someone who opposed his methods as liaison man?

Aside from the general discomfort of the situation. Carol's occasional glances at me, both in the airport and the car, made me feel on the spot. They contained something more than polite attention. Pulling off the freeway in San Francisco, the "something more" spoke.

"You're a handsome man, Mr. Osborne."

"Thank you. You're a handsome woman. You're not making a pass at me?"

"No. Just an observation."

The observation hung in the car, stimulating inappropriate fantasies, until we reached a park. We began a slow circle of it, searching for a parking place. A bandstand, surrounded by a large crowd and decked out in red, white and blue crepe paper, came into view. Someone paced it, holding a microphone in one hand and gesticulating with the other, pounding home some point. Carol nodded toward the figure.

"Tony."

We found a parking place and left the car, starting across the grass toward the bandstand. Near us on the street, a van rolled to a halt, its turbine dying, double-parked. The side doors, conservatively lettered KQIK NEWS, split. Two men emerged, one carrying a stereo remote camera and the other a microphone. The man with the microphone recognized Carol, waved and shouted, cupping his hand around his mouth.

"Has your boy done his number yet, Mrs. Wentworth?"

Carol, annoyed, gestured toward the bandstand. *"Your eyes are as good as mine, Dunnigun."*

The reporter, noticing her annoyance, grinned, shielded his eyes with his free hand and made an exaggerated search of the horizon, eventually stopping at the bandstand. He glanced back at Carol, shouting, *"I hope he's easier to find on the ballot."*

"Jerk," commented Carol, ignoring him, continuing across the grass.

"What was that all about?"

She shook her head, disregarding the incident. "Just Dunnigun's little joke. Dunnigun is—how can I put it tactfully—somewhat reactionary. He would prefer to get back to what he calls the Basics of the American Character. That's what he calls his nightly editorials."

"What kind of basics?"

"The Articles of Confederation, probably."

We reached the back of the crowd. Tony, still reduced to a bulky stick-figure by the distance, continued his speech, holding the microphone and pacing the platform. He gestured first with one hand, then with the other, deftly shifting the microphone from hand to hand. Without breaking either stride or sentence structure, he unbuttoned his collar and

loosened his tie.

In spite of my late arrival, putting me into his speech between two details in some incomprehensible tax reform argument, I found myself unable to take my attention from him. When I managed, I noticed Carol watching me, smiling.

“Good, isn’t he?” said Carol.

“Very. Is he always this . . .” I searched for the right word, trying to avoid advertising jargon. The right word eluded me. I fell back on my professional diction: “. . . dynamic?”

“Wait until you see the Jolson finish.”

“The who finish?”

Almost in spite of myself, I watched Tony. His presence filled the stage even in the open air. During his senatorial campaign, I remembered nothing like it. I wondered about the contrast.

“Is this a new acquisition?”

“What?”

“The style. It’s good.”

“No. Why?”

“He doesn’t seem like the same man I remember from the cube.”

“He’s been doing that Jolson-thing as long as I’ve known him. He used to do it in court with his summations.”

“Was he an effective lawyer?”

“Very.”

A roar of approval went up from the crowd. Carol and I glanced at the bandstand. Tony, the microphone held above his head like a sword, stood resolute. Whatever point he ended on, he seemed adamant about it. The crowd believed him. I smiled. Only a pro could get away with that kind of melodrama. Even at our distance, I could tell Tony enjoyed the cheering. Actors usually do.

Another speaker, elderly, hands trembling on his prepared speech, began talking, his voice barely audible even with the sound system. I sympathized with him. He would need a dancing bear to follow Tony.

People drifted away from the bandstand. Carol glanced at me, her expression inquiring whether I was ready to leave.

“What about your husband?”

“We’ll meet him at the boat.”

The boat, a thirty-five-meter racing yacht named *Carol*, moored in the San Francisco Marina, told me more about Tony than seeing him on the bandstand. Even without the rigging being shaped into dollar signs, the message was clear.

Carol and I walked down the wharf to the gangplank, then crossed to the boat. Unlike most of the larger yachts in the marina, booms wrapped in sailcovers, the *Carol* looked ready for sea. Only a crew was missing.

In the main cabin, Carol prepared coffee. I watched her work at the galley stove, wondering about her relationship with her husband. I kept reminding myself business and women seldom mixed. Even without business, mixing with women like Carol Wentworth was probably a bad idea. Her husband knew too many influential people. In spite of my comment to Mr. W, the idea of working for an ad agency in Alaska left me cold.

She handed me the coffee and sat across the cabin on a locker, rearranging several orange cushions. We talked about Tony, what kind of image the Winthrop and I were going to build for him, how the best images reflect who a person actually is. Talking about Tony’s career, she reminded me of a woman rearranging furniture, mentally trying one pattern, then another. Or better yet, a mother imagining her child’s

future. She sat on the cushions, a relaxed—almost dreamy—expression on her face, and talked about Tony's career. In spite of the pleasure she got from the thoughts, what she said sounded almost clinical, detached, without much reference to Tony as a person. Only once did she show anything like an emotional reaction, rather than an intellectual reaction to a pleasant abstraction. I asked what *she* wanted for Tony personally, not his career.

The dreamy expression disappeared. She thought, then looked at me, her voice—even her face—carrying a quality that inexplicably reminded me of the Winthrop.

"Mr. Osborne," she said, looking directly at me, "I want Tony to win this election."

Overhead, I heard footsteps on the gangplank. The boat yawed slightly. Tony appeared in the hatchway, backlit by the afternoon sun.

"Anyone home?"

"Just us image-builders," answered Carol, her momentary intensity gone.

Tony dropped easily down the stairs, collar still unbuttoned and tie loose. He took off his coat, draped it over a chair and glanced from Carol to me. She introduced me.

Before we could say much beyond our names, the gangplank creaked again.

"Father," said Tony, "I asked him over"—he nodded at me—"to hear what Mr. Osborne has to say. He's had a few."

A man in his sixties, heavy-set and gray-haired, started down the ladder, placing his feet carefully and watching them. Reaching the deck, he looked up and discovered himself the center of attention. He grinned.

"You thought I wouldn't make it, didn't you?"

"We knew you'd make it, Father. Why don't you sit over—"

"*Sit, sit, sit,*" boomed Tony's father. "I've been *sitting* all day." He looked from Carol to Tony, his eyes eventually stopping on me. "You Woody Winthrop's boy?"

"Spitting image," he said, thrusting out his hand and taking mine. "John Wentworth's the name."

I said my name. He failed to hear it.

"If you're half as smart as Woody, you'll do all right in this world."

"Thank you, sir, but—"

"It's true. Smart as a whip, that Woody Winthrop. When did he get married anyway?"

"I wasn't aware he—"

"Ahh," said John Wentworth, giving me an understanding wink, "an indiscretion. I see. Doesn't matter what you are nowadays, anyway. Don't feel bad about it for a minute, young man. You're *just* as good as anyone else. *Just* as good."

I gave up trying to correct his misimpression. "I'll remember that."

He walked over and clapped me on the shoulder. "Spitting image."

"Would you like a drink, John," asked Carol, diverting him.

"Drink?" He looked around, eyes bright. "Did someone say drink?"

While John Wentworth had been assuring me my parentage no longer mattered in a sophisticated world, Tony had touched on the holovision. A miniature flood raged inside the cube.

"Let's see what Dunnigun did for us today," said Tony.

"Or to us," added Carol. "I don't know how you can stand that man, Tony."

"He's always been fair with me, hasn't he?"

She handed Wentworth Senior his drink without answering Tony.

The flood disappeared, replaced by Dunnigun, seated at a table inside the holocube. Tony turned up the sound.

". . . In other news today . . ." Dunnigun faded. The park bandstand appeared.

"Now I'm only other news," complained Tony.

". . . State Senator Tony Wentworth, speaking at the dedication of the new Petrero Park clubhouse, called for state tax reforms to match those of New York and Minnesota . . ." The camera zoomed in on Tony, who paced the stage and gestured to punctuate his words.

". . . The inequity and injustice of our present state tax system should make the Governor blush. It is neither fairly conceived nor fairly applied. The rich pay not only a smaller percentage amount in taxes but a smaller per capita . . ."

The more I watched Tony on camera, the less I understood. Watching him. I felt restless, inclined to turn my attention away from the cube. At first, I thought having heard the speech in person accounted for my lack of interest. I forced myself to watch, hoping to pick up more pointers on Tony's style.

I noticed my reaction more than his style, a neutral, even negative, reaction. The little figure striding the stage, waving its arms, reached me with none of the energy I had felt that afternoon. None of the personality came through. Somehow, holovision filtered out Tony's best quality. He

seemed like a man mouthing words, words I neither cared about nor heard.

I remembered Tony's election statistics, his appeal shrinking as he drew on a larger constituency. A larger constituency, harder to meet personally, meant relying on the media and people like Dunnigun.

I excused my way past Tony's father, his attention rapt by the tiny replica of his son, and stood next to Carol.

"Tell me something, Mrs. Wentworth."

"Sure."

"This *is* the newsman we met at the park."

She nodded. "If you can call him that."

"How did he treat Tony in the last election?"

"Good question. It's bothered me ever since. He was fair with Tony."

Dunnigun, severe on everyone else in the campaign but Tony, had covered Tony's public appearances thoroughly and completely, running extensive excerpts from his speeches without comment. Even someone named Otis, the man in the campaign closest to Dunnigun's own views, got short coverage and critical commentary. Tony had a standing invitation to "Dunnigun Versus," a Saturday evening public affairs program with a debate format. He accepted the invitation four times during the campaign. Each time, Dunnigun seemed delighted.

"How does Tony come through on other stations?"

She nodded at the cube. "About like that."

"And on television?"

"The same."

I watched the cube, noticing the camera work, a medium distance shot of Tony on stage without any cross-cutting or

voice-over. The image faded with Tony in his Statue of Liberty stance, microphone aloft. In person, it had been effective, resolute. In the cube, it looked pretentious and annoying.

A commercial followed, catching my attention. A holographic cartoon dog ate and spat out half a living room full of furniture, searching for a meal. I laughed aloud. Carol gave me an inquiring look.

"Sorry. Professional interest."

The dog's owner, represented by two female legs and a knee-length skirt, gave it Dem Bones, a dry dog food. The dog, its maw gigantic, filling the cube, swallowed Dem Bones, box and all, then smiled, contented. A chorus chanted, "Dem Bones. Dem Bones. Dem . . . dry Bones." Tony shut off the set. Too bad. I wanted to place the ad agency who did the commercial. Mr. W—always ahead of his time—had commissioned the first holographic cartoons.

"Ten minutes," said Tony, beaming. "Ten minutes of prime-time coverage."

"Good speech, son," said John Wentworth, his voice deep and paternal. He walked in front of me and refilled his glass at the counter.

Tony looked at Carol.

"It was a good speech, Tony," she said. I could interpret nothing from her tone of voice.

Tony looked at me. "You're our media man."

I felt uncomfortable. Lone dissenters usually do. I tried to soften the effect of my opinion. "I saw it in person. That might have taken away some of the impact."

Tony frowned, shaking his head. "You didn't like it."

I equivocated. "It was all right, I suppose. A few things bothered—"

"The truth," said Tony, his expression drained of its earlier good will.

I looked from face to face, stopping at Tony. "It stunk."

In the silence, I could hear the boat creak. I imagined myself walking the plank from the top of the Winthrop Building. I could feel the Winthrop prodding me with a sword, saying, *You told him it stunk. Osborne! Off the edge with you!*

"What," asked Tony, his voice quiet and controlled, "exactly, do you mean by that?"

"You came across like an old movie."

"You mean my style is dated."

"Not exactly. This afternoon, I literally could not take my eyes—or ears—off you. You could have been talking about the dangers of tooth decay. It didn't matter. You kept my attention and your message came through. You had the crowd in the palm of your hand."

Tony relaxed.

"But," I continued, "and it's a *big* one, in the cube, you bored me stiff."

"You don't care about tax reform."

"It wasn't the content. It—"

"If you'd pay attention," said John Wentworth, scowling, "like you're paid to, you might *care* about the content of my boy's speech." He looked at Tony. "Don't listen to him, son. It was a good speech." He looked at me. "You're not getting paid to bad-mouth my boy."

"I wasn't bad-mouthing anyone. And attacking me isn't going to solve anything."

"Neither is talking nonsense," snorted Wentworth Senior.

He pushed the button on the seltzer bottle. It fizzed into his drink.

I shrugged. "The hell with it."

"No," said Tony. "Go on."

"*Tony*," insisted John, "the man's an idiot. Don't listen—"

"Father, please be quiet."

Grumbling something about Woody Winthrop's offspring being a cretin, John Wentworth started, silently, on his drink.

"Nothing came through on HV," I said. "None of your personality. It was like watching one of those Tyrone Bogart pictures in two dimensions and black and white."

"What do you mean by personality?"

"Energy, immediacy. Something like that." An idea occurred to me, an illustration. I looked at Carol. "Mrs. Wentworth, what was the idea in your husband's speech, not the exact words, but the idea?"

She thought a moment. "That with a Republican Governor, tax reform would be a reality."

Tony, startled, looked at her. "Carol—" He broke off and looked at me. "Do *you* know?"

Fortunately, I remembered. "It had something to do with an initiative proposal you want to get on the ballot."

Tony looked at his wife. "Carol, why didn't you know that?"

"It must have slipped by me, Tony."

"Slipped *by* you! Christ, it was the whole *point* of the speech."

I interrupted. "Mrs. Wentworth, what was the commercial just after Tony's speech?"

"I don't know—dog something. A dog eating a house of

something.” She thought, index finger raised to her lips, gazing past us at the overhead. “No. Dem Bones, that dog food stuff.”

“*Carol*,” said Tony, irritated. “How the hell can you remember some damn *dog* food and not the point of my speech?”

“That’s what I meant,” I said, “about not coming across on holovision.”

Carol, thinking about the exchange, looked at me. “Tell Tony about Dunnigun.”

One step ahead of me, she had considered my objections to Tony’s holovision presence—or lack of it—and applied them to Dunnigun’s willingness to let Tony on the air at the drop of a hat.

“Tony, have you ever wondered why Dunnigun was willing to give you as much air time as you wanted?”

“He likes me. Even our debates went off well.”

“The studio audience liked you.”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever watch a tape of the show?”

“Once or twice. What are you getting at?”

“Dunnigun probably noticed you don’t come over on holovision and decided to let you hang yourself.”

I watched Tony’s face. For the first time, he considered my suggestions seriously. Evidently, he had wondered about Dunnigun’s generosity. He seemed to come to some kind of conclusion.

“You’re not going to listen to this load-a crap, are you, Tony?”

“It may not all be—” began Tony.

"Load-a crap. You can't sell people like you sell dog food. People, at least the people *I* am used to associating with, are not dog food. And my son has *never* been dog food."

Tony, ignoring his father, glanced at Carol. "What do you think?"

"He may have something," she said.

"Load-a crap's what he's got."

Tony looked at me. "What do you suggest?"

Only one answer came to mind. Mr. W's projector. With the answer, I realized the extent of the Winthrop's duplicity. He agreed to shelve his projector if I could come up with an alternate method of selling Wentworth, he agreed knowing he had a sure thing. None of the traditional methods of advertising could overcome Tony's problem. I had fallen victim to one of the oldest ruses in the advertising game, being convinced I was getting a fair shake of loaded dice.

"You *do* have a suggestion," said Tony.

"I suggest we call Mr. Winthrop. Do you have a phone?"

IV

THE PHONE, A DECORATIVE MODEL—spherical with a screen in front and pushbuttons on top—had been stowed in a locker. Tony retrieved it. I pulled up the stubby antenna and punched out the Winthrop's office number. Opal, after a brief pause to relay who was calling and from where, put me through to the Winthrop. The screen flickered and settled.

"Mr. W?"

I had expected the Winthrop's face. Instead, I got a shot

across his office. On top of a pile of ten or twelve randomly heaped pillows sat the Winthrop, a high-collared coat of some kind buttoned to the neck, legs full lotus, hands resting lightly on his knees, the ad man guru. The projector stood on the table above him, man and machine, or perhaps mother and child.

“Is that you, Mr. W?”

That’s what I thought you said, Mr. W., are you well?”

“Aaaaaaaooooooooouuuuuuummmmmmmmmmmmmmm,” exhaled Mr. W.

“Pardon me?”

“Aaaaaaaooooooooouuuuuuummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.”

The head nodded forward, the eyes closing on the downswing and reopening on the upswing. “I am well, Roger.”

Roger? My first name. A new high in my relations with the Winthrop! Still, I felt compelled to puncture whatever he thought he was doing with the pillows and posture. “Glad to hear it, chief.”

“Do not, Roger,” said Mr. W. spacing his words, speaking slowing, giving his rendition of the voice of wisdom, “call me chief. Are the Wentworths with you?”

“They’re right here, chief.”

Momentary irritation surfaced and faded on the short Buddha. “I will speak with them.”

I walked away from the phone, muttering, “You’re on, baby.”

“What was that, Roger?” said the voice, languorous, almost ethereal.

“Nothing. They are—I mean, they’re listening. Oh, Holy One.”

I retired to the rear of the cabin to watch the Woody Winthrop Variety Hour. Tony introduced his wife. The Winthrop nodded solemnly.

"Gentleman," he said, "and Mrs. Wentworth. I have been analyzing the tapes of Senator Wentworth's previous campaigns. I expect the problem I have noticed is one familiar to you, or at least one brought to your attention by Roger. Before I demonstrate what I consider to be a possible solution to it, let me briefly review the more traditional approaches to political advertising. First . . ."

I quit listening. I knew most of the approaches, traditional or otherwise, to advertising. I wanted to watch guru W's audience for reactions. I expected severe negative reactions. Few swamis tread the corridors of power. No one reacted. Slowly, I realized why. My first impression—that the Winthrop intended some sort of Variety Hour, complete with juggling seals and the star contortionist—had been wrong. Whatever it had been, the show was over. This was the commercial. Like any good commercial, it followed Winthrop's commandments, particularly the first—get their attention. They watched the ad man guru, rapt.

"... the last method strikes closer to our problem. Roosevelt's fireside chats, Kennedy's press conferences, Malone's living room discussion—all had one thing in common. Each man knew how to use the mass media of his time in such a way that an intimate personal impression got across and with it the man's views and opinions. We have problems in this area."

John Wentworth gurgled, cleared his throat and spoke, "Load-a crap's what we've got."

"Pardon me, John?" said Mr. Winthrop.

"Nothing."

“Now we come to my suggested solution,” continued Mr. Winthrop. He stood and walked forward, reaching toward the phone. He carried it back to the telethesia projector. Somehow, the projector looked less sinister than usual. I squinted, examining it closely. The parabolic reflector, the device’s most personifying feature, had disappeared, replaced by a square tube. The tube ran from the top of the projector toward the phone and out of the picture.

“As John will tell you,” said Mr. W, “my background, principally in advertising, includes substantial familiarity with electronics. Combining the two interests, I have produced this device, a telethesia projector. I would like . . .”

Something new had entered Mr. W’s voice, new to the discussion and new to me. His usual air of indifference, his take-it-or-leave-it attitude, had vanished. The Winthrop wanted his projector used. He actually cared about the client’s opinion. I imagined the look of shock on Opal’s face when I proved, conclusively, the Winthrop’s essentially human, as opposed to Martian, nature.

“. . . and to conclude with a demonstration, I will use the tape I prepared with Roger’s help.”

The Winthrop touched on the hologram recorder by the projector. Tape slid past the playback beam. The image of a Burgher Beer bottle formed in my head, followed by an image of the valve in the neck. Somehow, the Winthrop had connected his machine to the phone, projecting the image of the Burgher bottle six hundred and fifty kilometers. Knowing, roughly, what was happening, I could counter the effect, pushing it to the back of my mind like a recurrent melody.

I looked around the cabin. The bored expression encouraged me. Perhaps Mr. W’s tape, designed to demonstrate his projector to me, would be ineffective on anyone else.

Momentarily, I felt the sway of the boat. Owning a boat had advantages. Swimming, for one. If I owned Wentworth's boat, I could attach a rubber raft to the taffrail—whatever a taffrail was—and float on it, my bottle of Burgher bobbling next to—

I shook my head, submerging the thought. Evidently, the Winthrop's projector relied on the customer's own memories to produce some of its effect. When the W first demonstrated it to me, I had thought of the pool at my apartment building. Now, I thought of the boat. I admired this sinister personalizing touch.

The tape ended. Mr. Winthrop repositioned the camera, staring into it at close range. John Wentworth yawned and stood up, stretching and talking through his yawn, "'nough ah 'is crap."

His mouth closed. He stepped across the cabin to the counter and surveyed the bottles, distaste evident on his face. "Carol, honey, I'm sick of this Scotch. Do you have any beer?"

Almost simultaneously, Tony spoke up, indicating a desire to join John Wentworth in a beer.

"Burgher," said Tony, "if we've got any."

Mr. Berger would have been proud. I felt sick. The Winthrop grinned and relaxed. He knew he had them.

Beer, none of it Burgher (to my relief and everyone else's disappointment) was produced from somewhere forward. Tabs were pulled and caps snapped. Their thirst satisfied, they returned their attention to Mr. W. Tony spoke first.

"You said something about a demonstration."

"How's your beer?" The Winthrop's tone showed none of its earlier worry.

“Fine. What’s that got—”

“You’d prefer a Burgher.”

“Yes, but—”

The Winthrop started into his technical discussion. Alpha and Theta rhythms, induction, modulation, projection. He concentrated on the method of preparing the tapes, an initial recording to establish the basic images (bottle, valve), followed by a second recording, working his way through the emotions he wanted stimulated in the consumer, orchestrating the tape.

“But what does it do?” asked Carol, bewildered by Mr. W’s jargon.

“It advertises,” I said. “Inside your head. It’s set up for beer right now. Mr. Winthrop wants to set it up for Tony.”

My explanation, succinct, sunk in with everyone. I watched Tony especially. He frowned, thought, shook his head, then looked at Mr. W. “No, I’m afraid we can’t use a thing like that.”

John Wentworth, evidently following the conversation in spite of the liquor, approached Tony, putting his arm around his son’s shoulder. “Tony, you have to move with the times.”

Tony nodded at the phone. “Not *those* times. That thing coerced me into wanting beer. How can you use a thing like that on voters, ethically?”

“Son,” said John Wentworth, his tone mildly disappointed, “this is progress. You can’t stop progress. It marches forward with or without you. You’re either with it or . . .”

“Against it?” I suggested.

“I was *going* to say left behind,” said Tony’s father, talking to me but looking at Tony. “And the Wentworths are never left behind.”

"Tony," said Carol, "it can win the election."

"She's right, son. This is politics and politics is hell."

"I thought," I said, "it was war that was hell."

"Same thing."

Tony shook himself free.

"Senator," interrupted the Winthrop. "How do you feel about Burgher Beer now?"

Tony shrugged, indifferent.

"Would you buy some?"

"Probably. I've never tried it."

"But you don't feel compelled to buy it."

Tony thought several seconds, introspective. "That's a difficult question. I know, generally, how the desire got into my mind, so I can control it."

"Take my word for it," said Mr. W. "It's the same even if you never heard of a telethesia projector. I've tested it. Only during the time the message is being delivered is there any compulsion involved. Beyond that, only the message remains. You can make up your own mind."

I could see the old Winthrop shining through the new guru, juggling phrases. He made the projector, delivering its message, sound as harmless as the mail man.

Tony shook his head. "No. We're not going to use it."

I began to admire Tony Wentworth. He had his career to lose, his future, years of accumulated hopes. Still, he said no.

"I'm sure," I said, "we can work out a conventional advertising campaign instead of—"

"On the contrary, Roger," said Mr. W, "it would hardly be worth doing as a conventional campaign." He looked from person to person," skipping me. "That's all we have to offer, Senator. A conventional campaign, other than as a sup-

plement to using the projector, is out of the question. If it doesn't interest you, I'm sure there are others—"

Mr. W let the sentence dangle, playing his hole card—others, Governor Webster. Until that moment, I suspected Mr. W of latent Republicanism. I had been wrong. He was ad man through and through, apologetic, prepared to offer his services to anyone who would take them, but on his terms. He had picked Tony as the weakest gubernatorial candidate, an ideal demonstration of the power of his projector. If Tony rejected it, there were . . ."

"Others," repeated Tony and smiled, the political realist in him re-emerging. He had considered the projector only as a weapon for his side. It had a double edge. He nodded.

"I'll think about it, Winthrop. I'll send word back to you via Osborne."

"Who's Osborne?" asked John Wentworth.

"Fine," said Mr. W and hung up. No good-bye, just click, dead screen.

John Wentworth lurched across the cabin and put his glass on the counter. "Tony"—he swayed, suppressed a belch, and continued—"sleep on it." He started toward the ladder. "Show's over, kid," he said to me. "Take me home—I mean, I'll take you home."

"I'll contact you within the next few days," said Tony, shaking hands with me.

V

NOW I HAVE TO WRITE about the beginning of my love affair with Tony's wife. It is the most difficult part for me to write. But without Carol, I would have left the campaign.

After a ride to my hotel with John Wentworth (he bounced over curbs on two right turns and almost ran down the boy who parks cars in front of the hotel). I went up to my room convinced I would quit. Mr. W had reneged on his promise to try a conventional campaign for Tony. At the time, I failed even to ask myself why he sent me in the first place. He knew I opposed the projector. He knew I would quit if he used it. I shrugged off the question, assuming he thought I could be convinced to stay once I became involved.

I had been at the hotel long enough to clean up and begin thinking about dinner when Carol called. She wanted, she said, to talk to me. The hotel's phone had so much static on the screen her expression was hard to read.

I asked whether Tony would be coming, too.

"No. Tony's on his way over to Sacramento to talk to some of the Party people. He won't be back until tomorrow morning."

Tony, it occurred to me, had evidently made up his mind about the projector. Since he thought my opinions matched the Winthrop's and probably wanted to avoid an argument, he was sending his wife with the bad news. Fine with me. If Tony rejected the machine and Mr. W rejected Tony, I could decline the honor of acting as liaison man for the next politician on Mr. W's list. I would be off the bandwagon and back on the beer truck.

We made arrangements to meet downstairs. Carol suggested dinner.

We drove to a restaurant near the beach, a pizzeria called "Vitorio's," Carol, her Levi's and blouse replaced by a splotchy-patterned knee-length dress, side-stepped me when I brought up the purpose of our meeting. When I asked

directly, she said, "Can we postpone that? I'd like to get to know you a little better."

A cab slowed in front of us, preparing to double-park. She swerved around it, the instinctive reaction of an accomplished San Francisco driver.

I wondered, when we finally parked the station wagon and started up the sidewalk toward Vitorio's, what getting to know me had to do with telling me Tony's decision on the projector. Entering Vitorio's, I decided to postpone wondering, too. The prospect of dinner with a beautiful woman does a lot to dampen wondering.

Vitorio—blond, Swedish-looking with an armful of large menus—showed us to a booth in a rear alcove. Somewhere, either live or recorded, something played music thought to be Italian. Vitorio seated us with menus and left. On the wall opposite our booth, a mural—mostly water and moonlight—attempted to depict Naples or Venice. A giant moonbeam, reflected on the water, illuminated a minute object, presumably intended to represent a gondola or a small whale. Carol noticed me inspecting it.

"Don't worry, Roger, the food's good."

"How does your husband feel," I asked, pulling my eyes from the mural, "about you having dinner with strange ad men?"

"Tony's in Sacramento."

Tony's in Sacramento. Somehow the most obvious explanation of the phrase—husband out of town, wife entertains strange ad man—seemed unlikely. How could sex alone, even with a temptingly handsome younger man, be worth the risk? It couldn't.

Still, by the time the pizza arrived, thick wedges transferred expertly from the platter to our plates by Vitorio himself, my predatory instincts—along with my hormones—had been aroused. Almost involuntarily, I weighed my chances. Weighing them, I still came up a lightweight.

On the one hand, she had a State Senator, a lawyer and potential gubernatorial candidate, money, leisure, a life she enjoyed. On the other hand (not quite in the palm of the other hand) stood Roger Osborne, handsome (true), suave (true), loving (under proper circumstances), but still Roger Osborne, ad man. From her point of view, the risks outweighed the rewards. Yet some women, I consoled myself, liked risks.

“You’re losing ground,” said Carol.

“Hmm?”

She indicated the remaining slice of pizza.

“I’m getting full. Do you think we could talk business?”

She daubed at her mouth with a napkin, nodding, chewing.

“Is Tony going to use Mr. W’s projector?”

“I’m not sure.” She pointed at the platter between us, “Can I have that if you’re not going to eat it?”

“Sure. Do you have any idea what Tony thinks about it?”

“Some. I think his opinion is about the same as yours. He’d rather not use the projector, but if it’s used, he wants to make sure it’s used properly.”

“How do you know my opinion?”

“I talked to your Woody Winthrop.” She bit into the wedge of pizza. Cheese dropped from her chin to the slice. She took another bite, this one clean.

“I thought your husband had already decided against using the projector and you were assigned to bring me the bad news.”

She finished the pizza and licked her fingers. "No. Tony will tell you himself."

"Then why are we having dinner with handsome men?"

Maybe. Somehow, I doubted it.

She reached for the check. I reminded her of Mr. W's expense account. I paid and scooted out of the booth, then helped her into her sweater.

"Can I ask a rude question, Carol?"

"As long as it's not too rude." She turned, bundling her sweater at the throat with both hands.

"I think you are an attractive woman . . ."

"Thank you."

". . . I keep getting boy-girl messages from you."

She waited, looking at me. "Yes."

"That's what I thought."

Leaving, I took a last look at the mural. The object in the moonbeam (gondola? whale?) could have been a ship, sinking.

I got back to the hotel at quarter to four. I had not yet fallen in love with her, though I teetered. I tried to sort out my impressions, both of Carol and the situation I saw opening in front of me. Before I left the boat, she had looked at me, her expression genuinely inquiring, and said, "I wonder what you think of me."

I had started to say something innocuous, but she interrupted, telling me about her "other affair." After the stillbirth of their daughter, Carol had noticed a change in her relationship with Tony. She wanted emotional support, some response to help her deal with her sense of loss. Tony, probably having his own problems coping with the loss, had failed to respond. Someone else—she never said who—had responded. Telling me, she smiled, a

weak smile at painful memories, and said, "I was a little old for an identity crisis, wasn't I, Roger."

"You don't really have to talk—

"I want you to *understand*, Roger, to understand me. Twenty-five was a little old, wasn't it?"

"I don't think it's like chicken pox. Adults get it, too."

"It could happen again."

"I doubt it. Those things usually—"

"If Tony lost, it could happen."

"If Tony lost," I said, hoping a joke would change her mood, "it could happen to Tony."

She answered seriously. "No. He's really very good. I think he can take anything. It could happen to me."

Reflecting on her comments that morning in my hotel room. I attributed them to guilt at having the affair. Over the next week, we saw each other frequently and the impression was strengthened. Only once during the days we spent together did she edge toward the subject again. Still, it was enough to let me see what Tony's career, since their daughter's stillbirth, had come to mean to her.

Tony had taken the boat out with some political friends to mull over his decision on the projector. Carol and I had gone out to Golden Gate Park to spend part of the afternoon. By then, I knew I had fallen in love with her. I kept feeling the time we spent together was an isolated incident in our lives. I wanted something more permanent. I had tried to bring up the subject several times. Each time, Carol avoided it, preferring to let our ambiguous situation stand.

We sat on a knoll overlooking a baseball diamond and watched a local team practice. I tried to bring up the subject again.

"Carol, let's go somewhere together."

She lay back on the grass, head propped in her hands, staring at the overcast sky. "Where?"

"Europe, maybe."

She shook her head, "Too crowded."

"OK, anywhere."

"You know what I *would* like to do?"

"What?"

"I'd like a farm."

"If you want a farm, we'll get one."

"With goats. I've always wanted a goat."

"If you want goats, I'll get you some goats."

"And chickens. They're stupid, but I like chickens." She looked at me. "A rooster, too, of course."

"Right. One rooster. You don't want a woolly mammoth or anything like that, do you?"

"No. They track up the house. But a horse would be nice."

"Goat, chicken, rooster, horse," I said. "No woolly mammoth."

"Roger." She continued staring at the sky. "Could we do that?"

"Sure."

"And what about Tony?"

"Leave him."

She remained quiet several seconds. I looked down at her, her head still propped in her hands. She shook her head slightly. "I can't, Roger."

"Why?"

"I just can't. I don't think I'd be anybody at all without Tony. I'd just disappear." She looked at me, trying to smile. "Like the woolly mammoth."

"What if Tony lost the election?"

“Then”—she thought a moment—“then maybe I could. I’m so afraid we’re going to lose it.”

During the time Carol and I spent together, I began to understand the meaning of those two conversations. At first, I thought I was the odd-man-out in a love triangle— me, Carol, Tony. Gradually, I realized Carol and Tony had stopped loving each other long before Roger Osborne appeared on the scene. My true rival, the “other man” who kept Carol with Tony, was his career. Her feelings, her identity, her image of herself, were almost inextricably jumbled together with his career.

Once I understood this, two things became clear. If I followed my own convictions against being involved with the projector, if I left the campaign, I left Carol. I lost all hope of any permanent relationship with her. She would never leave Tony before the election.

On the other hand, if I stayed with the campaign and they used the projector, Tony would certainly win and Carol would stay with him. I could see no way out of the situation. Too bad, Roger—heads you lose, tails you lose.

These thoughts, along with one not fully realized until Tony told me his decision on the projector, made me a very unpleasant person to be around. My normally—what frivolous?—nature had been caught in a pincer, my feelings for Carol confronting my convictions. I was becoming—much to my annoyance—as serious a person as Tony or Carol or even Mr. W.

The following Thursday, Tony left a message at my hotel. He wanted to see me at the boat. I took the Hyde Street cable car to Fisherman’s Wharf and walked to the Marina. The *Carol*, more securely battened down than on my first visit, lay

in its slip. Crossing the gangplank, I began to feel my apprehension about meeting Tony. I kept wishing he would simply disappear and leave me with Carol.

I found him aft, red-faced from almost a week at sea, sitting in a captain's chair, drink in one hand, one deck shoe on the rail, staring out at the bay. He either failed to hear me or preferred to ignore me.

"You'll freeze to death out here," I said.

He looked around, then held up the glass. "Antifreeze. Want one?"

I declined the offer and sat down in the chair next to his. Across the bay, the vague outline of Marin County showed through the long finger of fog reaching in from the sea.

"Good trip," said Tony, watching the fog envelop more and more of the Golden Gate Bridge. "I hated to come back. We had to beat back up the coast most of the way. It was still a good trip. The sea clears your head. I went a day and a half without thinking about politics."

"A new record?"

"Close." He looked at me for the first time. "Carol said she talked to you while I was gone."

"Yes."

"She said you don't like the idea of using Winthrop's projector in my campaign."

"In any campaign."

"That's an odd position for one of Winthrop's employee's to take."

"Advertising makes strange bedfellows."

He nodded without smiling. Something—some momentary thought—showed in his eyes, then vanished. I suspected I had chosen the wrong aphorism to paraphrase.

"I talked over using the projector with Carol," said Tony.

“She wants to use it.”

“I know,” I looked around the boat. “Is she here?”

“Below. I want your opinion on what I should do. The projector *will* be a political weapon in this campaign. Osborne. The only issue I can see is whose side it will be on, mine or Webster’s. What would you do in my situation?”

I had the feeling he already knew what he would do in his situation. I hedged, shrugging, “I’m not in your situation. Have you made your decision about it?”

“Don’t worry about my decision. I want your opinion.”

I looked out at the bay. Most of Marin County had disappeared in the fog. Only Alcatraz, the lights of the amusement park blurred and fuzzy, showed in the gray. I was the wrong person to answer. I had an axe of my own to grind. Still, Tony had asked my opinion. As long as I was indirectly on the payroll, I owed him that much.

“If you use it,” I said, “you’ll win. I don’t think there’s much question about that. If someone else uses it, you could fight it in court.”

“And lose the election.”

“Not necessarily. The court fight itself might be good for the campaign.”

He turned sideways in his chair, watching me closely. “As I understand the device, it has two applications, the direct control of conduct and the latent effect, the advertising effect, left over after the initial impact. Is that correct?”

I nodded.

“Which of these do you object to?”

I left like I was being cross-examined. “I don’t like the whole thing. If someone walked into a voting booth just after being exposed to it, they would vote for Genghis Khan.”

"But if a little time had passed, a candidate—once his message got across—would still have to stand or fall on his own merits."

I could see his lawyer's mind at work, splitting hairs to get the result he wanted. "Probably."

"So the real issue is *how* the projector is going to be used, to stuff the ballot box or get across a rational argument and let that argument determine the vote."

"Yes, but—"

Carol stuck her head out of the hatchway, interrupting me. "Hey, you two, why don't you move the party inside. It's cold out here."

"Very," I said.

We left our chairs and went below. At the foot of the ladder, Carol handed us each a martini. Thinking about Tony's argument, I was stuck as much by his shift in attitude as the content. When he first heard of the projector, he reacted on moral grounds. I remembered seeing a genuine struggle on his face. But on deck, his arguments had been reasonable, rational, logical, a lawyer's approach to problems, apparently devoid of moral considerations. At some point during his cruise, he must have accepted the idea of using Mr. W's projector. The thought bothered me.

"Roger wants me to tell his boss I won't use the projector," said Tony.

Carol, kneeling at one of the lockers and stowing something, her back to Tony, caught my eye, frowning.

"You don't like that idea, do you, Carol?" continued Tony, aware of her reaction without seeing her face.

She answered without looking around. "No. I think it's foolish not to use what's available. But the decision is yours, Tony."

His face took on an expression I had seen once before, the expression I noticed when Mr. W produced the stick after the carrot failed, the ironic self-mockery of political realism. "The decision is mine." He let the sentence stand a moment. Carol, probably recognizing his tone of voice, glanced around.

"It is mine, isn't it, Carol?"

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you and Winthrop and probably my father, and for all I know, Osborne here, set this thing up so I can only make one decision?"

Carol stood up. An unexpected wave from the bay jostled the boat. She steadied herself against the bulkhead. "I don't understand what you mean, Tony."

"Carol," he said, his voice louder. "I'm not naive, politically or"—he glanced in my general direction—"otherwise. If I reject Winthrop outright, he takes the projector to Webster. If I fight that in court, not only do I spend what money we have but the big political money dries up. Even if I won in court, I'd have to get a loan to cover the filing fee. If I lost, it would be money down the drain, politically speaking. The other alternative is using the projector, and that—did Winthrop spell all this out when you talked to him, Carol?"

She seemed startled by the question.

"You did talk to him, I see. I wondered. No, he wouldn't spell it out. He's too good a salesman to do that. He let you put two and two together like I've been putting two and two together. For example, why is Osborne still here?"

That question startled me.

"After all," continued Tony, "Osborne opposes using the projector on what I believe are essentially moral grounds. But he's still here, isn't he? He's still involved in something he thinks is morally objectionable. Did Winthrop spell out how to keep him here, Carol?"

Carol, paler, started to respond, by her expression a denial. Tony cut her off.

"No. Winthrop just gave you the facts of life and let you figure out the rest. But why did he want Osborne here at all? That one bothered me the longest." He glanced at me. "Do you know?"

"I've wondered. I don't know."

"Your Mr. Winthrop was very careful to show me the projector had two applications, one coercive and totally unacceptable, the other persuasive—more or less—and, assuming the other factors in the situation were properly arranged, acceptable. He knew how I would react to the idea of letting him control the projector's use. So he made Osborne available to give me a third alternative—one he knew I had to—no, *have* to choose. Carol, I hate being manipulated, especially by you."

"No one's manipula—"

"What's the third alternative?" I asked.

Tony looked at me. "A limited use of the projector with someone in charge of that use who is more acceptable to me, someone more—what, trustworthy?—something like that."

"Me."

"Winthrop can handle the technical side, making the tapes and handling equipment problems, but you will be the one with the power to say, yes, use it, or, no, don't, subject to my approval. I know Winthrop's kind. He is a determined man. If I said no, could I be sure he wouldn't use it in spite of me? So

without someone like you between him and his machine, I could never use it. He knows that. He picked you because of that. So the decision on whether the projector gets used isn't mine at all, Osborne, but yours. Do you use it?"

Tony was right. I remembered the Winthrop saying objectivity would be a problem in Tony's campaign. I would need it. Somewhere, I had lost it. I should have seen the Winthrop's hand manipulating the situation, adjusting, refining. The Winthrop involved all his life with the psychology of decision-making; it takes a decision to decide to buy a product had balanced the external situation so Tony could make only one decision.

What about Roger Osborne? What decision would I make? Gradually, I realized all of us had been set up. The Winthrop wanted the projector used. His purpose had been clear from the beginning. Like the salesman he was, he attended to every detail of the transaction, producing the optimum conditions to make his sale, using me, using Carol, using Tony, compromising us all.

I looked from Tony to Carol. Intellectually, I understood what the Winthrop had done. Emotionally, I knew what I wanted. Emotionally, it didn't matter that I wanted it because of the Winthrop. Whatever I would lose by staying with the campaign, would be less than losing Carol, or not even Carol, but the hope of having her.

I nodded, "OK."

VI

LEWIS WAS JUST IN HERE, looking over my shoulder. After two days of associating with him, listening to his asinine questions, I have taken a profound dislike to him. "I'm just

doing my job, Osborne,” he responds. He read over the last section of my statement and nodded, satisfied. “That’s more like it. So Wentworth himself actually made the decision.”

I snapped the pages out of his hand and told him to get out.

Lewis, I have no idea what kind of political game you are playing, what kind of reputation you want to make for yourself but you are wrong to try and make it by using Tony.

I only have a little more to say. It ought to be enough, both for you and the rest of Governor Webster’s crowd.

You know as much as I do about the primary election. One by one, the other Republicans dropped out, each giving his support to Tony. They knew Tony personally or from speeches in the legislature, a small group, ideal for feeling the impact of Tony’s personality. Tony, by default, easily got the nomination—without using the projector.

After the primary, the situation changed. I found myself up to my ears managing a conventional advertising campaign for Tony. The Winthrop would have nothing to do with it. After all, he might inadvertently get Tony elected without using his projector.

I became caught up in the dilemma I predicted. If I tried to minimize Tony’s poor media presence by staying with barnstorming politics, rallies, meetings, et cetera, an insufficient number of people heard him to be impressed. If I increased media coverage, the larger audience remained unimpressed. Initially, we had a favorable poll prediction. The field poll put Tony at 53 percent, explaining it on the basis of Webster’s unpopular record and the electorate’s ignorance of Tony. (“Ignorance,” commented the Winthrop when I told him, hoping to deflate the confidence he had in our ultimate failure, “is the father of hope.” I wondered, from

time to time, whose ignorance he meant, the electorate's or mine.)

Over the summer, we slipped to 21 percent. To compound my problems, I turned thirty, noticed my first gray hairs and began suspecting I had an ulcer. The chuckwagon on the campaign trail is notorious.

My meetings with Carol, less frequent once the campaign got under way, became intense emotional scenes, beginning with the pleasure lovers take in seeing one another and ending in quarrels. Most of the quarrels were my fault. Short-tempered because of the campaign pressures and the hectic pace, I pushed her for a decision on leaving Tony. When Tony began slipping in the polls, she started accusing me of deliberately sabotaging the campaign, throwing everything in my face from my feelings for her to my Party affiliation. The emotional imbalance of the situation upset us all.

Except Tony. Throughout the campaign, he indicated—both by the things he said and his attitude toward me—an understanding of the problems I had to deal with. By the end of October, everyone knew we would lose.

On the Sunday before election day, the Winthrop called me at the hotel. I had just finished coordinating the advance men for Tony's last day of speeches, a rapid—almost frantic—last minute crisscross of the state from San Diego to Alpine County, culminating in a debate Monday night with Webster. I had not talked to the Winthrop for three weeks. Though my checks still arrived every week from the Winthrop building, signed in his meticulous hand, I had failed, among the myriad activities calling for my attention, to keep him abreast of events. He came on the phone talking.

"Osborne, do you ever get off the phone?"

"Rarely. Things have been frantic recently."

"And unsuccessful."

"I don't know if I'd—"

He held up a copy of Sunday morning's *LA Times*, cutting off my protest. The headline, in large red letters, read.

WENTWORTH CAMPAIGN

FLOUNDERS

AT ELEVENTH HOUR

"The *Times*," he said, "thinks otherwise."

"They've been wrong before."

"And so do I. Has Wentworth indicated when we are going to use the projector? The tapes are prepared. This . . ." He glanced at the paper, rereading the column under the headline: "... statewide debate you have scheduled for tomorrow evening—is it being holovised?"

"Yes."

"That seems to me like the ideal opportunity. We should have the largest audience."

He waited, expecting some response from me. I had none. Since my initial acceptance of my role as campaign advertising coordinator—as well as buffer between the Winthrop and his projector—Tony had never mentioned the projector, either to me or Carol. All of us assumed he planned some kind of last-ditch use of it.

"I really don't know what Tony has in mind, Mr. W, but—"

"Has he said anything recently?"

"No."

"Have *you* made any plans to use my projector?"

"No."

The Winthrop thought a moment, eyes looking past the camera, expression darkening. "He's said nothing."

"Not a word."

He looked at me, his chain of thought complete, determination evident on his face. "Wentworth is somewhat tougher than I had thought. Give him this message, Osborne. Tell him I have completed the tape. Tell him I intend to make arrangements within the next twenty-four hours to use it. Tell him—"

"Mr. W, *I'm* supposed to have the authority to—"

"Forget that nonsense, Osborne. Just deliver my message. The situation has, I think, changed and I don't have time to worry about some illusory agreement. Tell him I intend to use the projector whether he consents or not. I will not have some two-bit politician interfering with my plans. Do you understand that, Osborne?"

"No, *I* don't understand it and I don't think Tony will understand it. I don't understand *you* either. I think you're sick or something."

"Are you finished?"

"Completely."

"Fine. Now be a good boy and deliver my message."

He hung up.

I tried to contact Tony. When I finally got through to him in Sacramento, he listened, stoic, to my delivery of the Winthrop's message. I expected a reaction, violent, explosive. None came. When I finished, Tony said, "Thank you, Osborne. I want you to wind up the campaign. Call Webster's people. Tell them the debate's off for tomorrow night."

"It doesn't matter. He'll just buy air time."

"I know that. Please do as I say. I want you to know I appreciate what you've done over the last few months. You've been trying to solve an impossible problem. Winthrop, frankly, is right. The only way I can become Governor is by using his projector. He's an intelligent man. I wish he were more than intelligent."

He started to hang up, then hesitated, a reluctant, pained expression on his face. "By the way, I believe Carol is at our house in San Francisco. You might tell her about this conversation. I plan to come back to the city tomorrow. I'll stay on the boat. That should avoid any embarrassment."

After he hung up, I sat in my hotel room mulling over the conversation. The longer I thought, the more ambiguous it became. At first, I thought Tony was agreeing to let Mr. Winthrop use the projector, realizing it would be used no matter what he said. But something in his tone, a resigned, matter-of-fact flavor, had caught my attention. It seemed inappropriate to my interpretation. I tried to call him back. The line was busy.

I saw Tony only once after that, the following Tuesday. No one, including Carol, had seen him since Sunday. The news about the projector broke Monday morning, headlines from San Francisco to Washington. The papers, picking up my news releases, kept saying Tony was "in seclusion" or "unavailable for comment." The detail carried in the stories—what the projector did, its developer (someone had found a twenty-year-old picture of the Winthrop: after that, the press kept saying "the young developer of the telethesia projector"), its planned use in Tony's campaign—indicated someone had been available for comment.

Tuesday night, I parked Carol's station wagon in the lot near the marina. The polls had closed a half-hour before. When I got to the boat, I paused at the gangplank and looked out at the bay. The day, windy, had blown the fog out to sea. Through the clear night air, I could see the lights of Sausalito on the Marin County side. The Golden Gate Bridge, itself lit and busy with streams of cars, showed clearly from the deck.

Tony, barely visible in his dark coat, its collar up, sat on deck watching the bay. Aware of my presence, he spoke without looking around.

"Why did you come, Osborne?"

"I thought I owed it to you."

I sat down in the canvas chair next to him, remembering my last visit to the *Carol*. Gradually, I became aware of murmuring voices from somewhere. I looked around. Light showed around the edges of the main cabin hatch. Below, either a radio or a holovision was reporting election returns.

"... Proposition twenty-seven, the controversial tax reform initiative—first proposed, I believe, by Tony Wentworth—seems to be going down in . . ."

"You don't owe me anything, Osborne. You did your job. And Carol can make her own choices. Has she made it, by the way?"

"Yes. She's waiting for me at the hotel." I let him absorb the information. "I felt I owed it to myself, then, if not to you. I thought you were going to let Winthrop use the projector."

He remained silent. The voices from the main cabin were relaying computer extrapolations of early election returns: *"... as expected after yesterday's revelations, Tony Wentworth is trailing significantly. With two per-*

cent of the vote counted, our computer projects a landslide re-election for . . .”

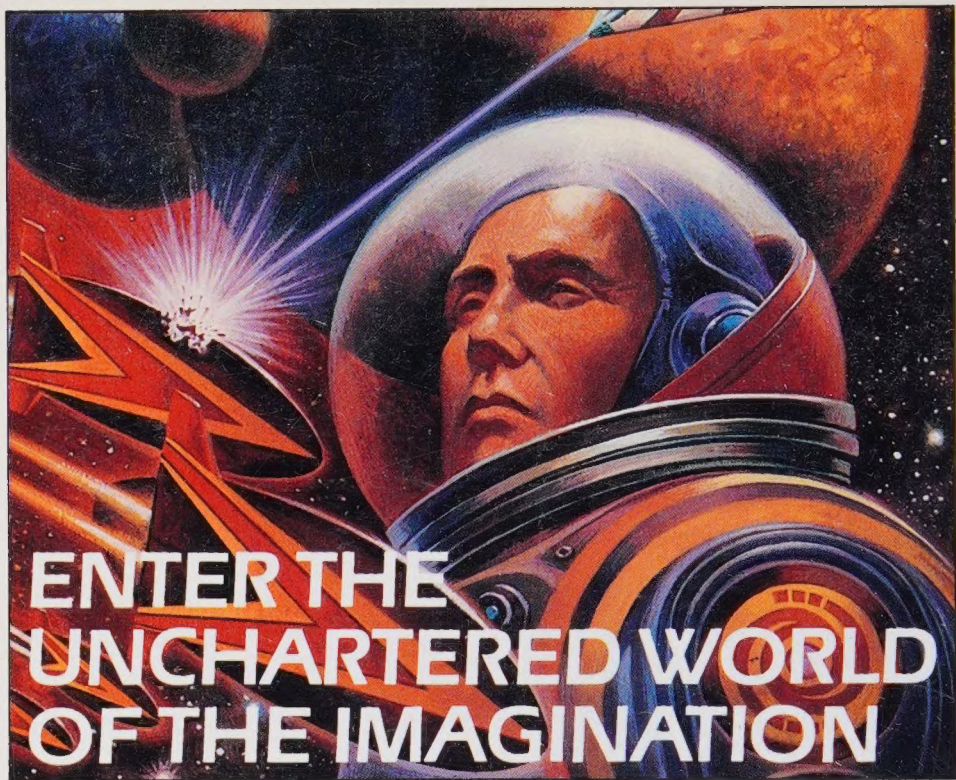
“I think when things settle down,” said Tony, “I’ll take a trip. Acapulco. Someplace warm.”

“Tony, there was someone named Lewis from the state Attorney General’s office at my hotel today. He wants me to make a statement. What shall I tell him?”

“Just tell him the truth, Osborne.”

I left the boat a few minutes later. That was the night before last. Since then, I’ve been writing this damn statement, trying to show you the truth, Lewis. For your own reasons—political reasons—you want Tony to be guilty of something. You want me to say he ordered the projector used and someone (Who would you like it to be? Me? Carol? The Winthrop?) called Dunnigun and leaked the story, then made the anonymous call to your office.

Me? No, not me. I should have. I wanted to. I didn’t have the guts to pick up the phone, to lose everything. Tony did.



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